And Manny Makes Three
Gay Romance
Trina Solet

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(Gay Romance)

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Chapter 1

Zack and his son, Al, were living together happily in their comfortable house. If they were missing something, they didn't know it. Maybe they couldn't miss something that was still unknown to them. Instead of yearning for some unknown element that would make their lives complete, Zack and Al were following their bedtime routine.

There were many delays and digressions before Al actually got into bed. He had to speak to PJ, the cat, about several important matters. He also had to show PJ his latest drawing. Pawing and sniffing at it is how PJ showed her appreciation. Al finally got under the covers making sure to leave room for his father. But it was never enough room. When Zack sat down, Al shifted again as his father crowded the small bed. Zack settled himself on top of the cover with the book, and Al squirmed as the cover got pulled too tight.

"You're too big," Al told his father. Zack was 6'1" and in good shape, and he stayed that way mostly by trying to keep up with a five year old.

"You're too small," Zack told his son.

"No, I'm not. I'm a kid." Al tried to pull the cover free from under Zack. Zack stared at him and waited for Al to realize that that was impossible.

"You're heavy," Al complained now huffing with futile effort.

"You're just weak. I told you to eat your broccoli. But you didn't listen." Zack waited another second or two for his message to sink in then moved a little to free up the cover.

"Dad, read already," Al said when Zack didn't start reading immediately.

Al settled himself into the pillow so that he could see the pages of the book. Zack turned the book a little more his way so Al could read along and look at the illustrations of course.

The first time Zack picked up and opened James And The Giant Peach, he was a little stunned. Al had seen it on a bookstore shelf and asked

for it. The first page of the book had an illustration of the four year old James as a dark eyed, serious boy with a big head. He was holding in his arms a cat. This was almost a drawing, but more a caricature, of Al at the exact age when they got PJ, their cat. Zack laughed, not believing his eyes. To Zack, it seemed like a miracle. Especially since Al had specifically requested this book because of his fascination with giant food. It was as if this book was written just for Al. It then waited on the shelves for Al to be born, to walk into a bookstore, to recognize and demand it because it was rightfully his.

"It sounds kind of scary," Zack had warned him after reading just the first paragraph.

Zack knew what Al's answer would be. Al was a tough little guy. He wasn't daunted.

"I won't be scared," he promised. "I want it," he had pleaded and demanded at the same time as only a child can.

Zack couldn't really pass up the book with such a fitting illustration. And he couldn't wait until Al saw it for the first time.

The first time Al had seen that illustration of James with a cat, he had gone bug-eyed.

"He has a cat, he has a cat! Just like me," Al had yelled pointing a finger at the book then leaned close to peer at this other boy with a cat. It was a lot like when PJ looked at herself in the mirror, not quite sure what she saw. But soon enough Al was impatient to hear the story. Of course he kept waiting for the cat to make an appearance in the story which it never did. But there was plenty of fun in the book for Al. The aunt named Sponge always got a giggle out of him. When James started crawling inside the peach, Al would lean forward like he wanted to jump into the book.

By now the book had been read many times, and Al knew what to look forward to. The appearance of the peach in the story was greeted with a round of applause from Al. As Zack slouched down so Al could lean against his shoulder while they read, their heads were close together over the book. Zack's hair was dark blond while Al's was dark brown as were his eyes. Zack's eyes were blue, and he often took them off the page to watch Al's reactions. While Zack traced the words with his finger, Al followed along sometimes mouthing the words he recognized or remembered.

Zack watched to see how sleepy Al was getting. He saw Al yawn, but

he refused to shut his eyes yet. He would soon. When Zack started to notice Al's eyes begin to half close as he fought to stay awake, he would slow down his reading and soften his voice to lull him to sleep. Zack knew that Al was fully asleep when he stopped reading and there was no objection. Then the trick was for Zack to get up very slowly and carefully then lower Al gently to his pillow. Zack always lingered for a moment. His excuse was that he was making sure Al would stay asleep. Really, he just liked watching his peaceful, sleeping face.

In the mornings, Al was always dragging his feet before kindergarten. As usual, he was playing with the cat, threatening to make Zack late for work. Before Al came along, Zack would often go in to work early and stay late. Sometimes he would go in at 5:00AM if he couldn't sleep. That way he had the whole office to himself. At one time, he had been proud of his workaholic tendencies. But taking care of Al had made him strictly a nine to five guy. His life was about Al not about work. Now he was worried that the new Borden project would endanger his time with Al. It was a big account and very important to their fledgling company. If they got it, there would be a lot of extra work and just in time for Al to be out of kindergarten for the summer. Zack planned to take as much of the work home as he could manage. That way he could be there for Al in the evenings. But there was still the problem of what to do with Al during the day over the summer break.

Little Rainbow World was where Al spent his afternoons after kindergarten let out until it was time for Zack to pick him up when he finished work. The place, which he and Al just called Little Rainbow, had a long waiting list of gay and lesbian parents who wanted to make sure their little ones spent time in a positive, accepting environment. It was important to Zack too that Al played with other kids who had two dads or two moms though some like Al had single parents. Zack had only managed to get Al in for the afternoon program for the summer months. The half day summer program was booked well ahead by smarter and quicker parents than him.

There were still a few weeks of kindergarten left giving Zack a little time to figure things out. For now he just had to get Al to sit down and eat breakfast.

"Al, if you don't want cereal, just say so. I'll give you broccoli for breakfast every morning," Zack said just loud enough for Al to hear. Sometimes that worked better than all the shouting.

"You can't do that!" Al said as he ran into the kitchen to make sure there was no broccoli in his cereal bowl. "There's no vegetables for breakfast. It's not allowed," he told Zack even as he saw his bowl was full of cereal and milk and nothing green.

Al pulled out the chair noisily and sat down to eat still looking at his father to make sure he got the message about appropriate breakfast foods. But Zack wanted to make sure his own message got through.

"Who says there's no vegetables for breakfast? I told you before. I'm a grown up. I can do whatever I want." Zack was eating toast and drinking coffee in his usual way - while standing up and checking a few things on his laptop.

"No, you can't," Al contradicted him.

"If you want to grow up and do whatever you want, eat your broccoli." It was an often repeated claim in their household.

"No. I'm having cereal." Al was slurping cereal with a big spoon as he preferred for some reason.

"Fine. But don't blame me if you stay little."

Al frowned into his cereal bowl. Getting big while not eating broccoli was a conundrum of his young life. He had been told repeatedly that it was impossible, and it worried him. He didn't want to stay little and not get to do all the good stuff. But he wasn't going to eat broccoli no matter what.

As Al finished up his cereal, Zack got a phone call. George called telling him that plans would need to be redrawn. Zack listened to the stuff George told him with only one ear. It was all too detailed and technical to mean much to him. They would be getting all of that in writing anyway, and George and Yuka would be dealing with most of the issues. He would just get to play with the numbers.

George had pulled Zack into Advanced Planning and Design years ago when it was still a two person operation on the verge of shutting its doors. George Kirby and Yuka Mishima had secretly called their company Intelligent Design and were one lost bet away from making the name official before Zack came along. Unlike the two of them, he was not an architect. He was just "the guy who got shit done". That title, coined by George, almost made it onto Zack's business cards. Thank God the printer called him to double check that he really

wanted his cards to say that. Curtailing George's sense of humor was sometimes the main part of Zack's job. At the beginning, he had been in charge of marketing, client relations, which meant keeping clients from strangling George, also keeping Yuka from strangling George, and making sure they made a profit. Now that the company had grown, he mainly focused on the financial stuff, leaving the rest to their capable staff.

"Did you put fresh water in PJ's bowl?" Zack asked after he was finished with his phone call. He had made that Al's job since Al was the one whose crying got them stuck with that cat.

"Yes," Al confirmed while putting on his shoes. He could tie them himself, but it was a painstaking process.

"Good. And food?"

"Yes," Al said again. He had to start all over on his left shoelace. It would have been easier and quicker for Zack to do it for him, but Zack knew it was his job to suffer while watching Al do things the hard way so he could learn.

"Not too much food, right?"

"Just half, like you showed me," Al said with a show of exaggerated patience, which he may have learned from Zack.

"Good, we don't want PJ getting fat. Let's go."

As Zack headed toward the front door, he found Al blocking his way.

"We can't go yet," Al said. He stood with his arms out so Zack couldn't pass.

"What? Why?"

"The litter box." Al huffed a little. He had it so rough.

"No. Why?" Zack complained as he took the laptop bag off his shoulder.

"You told me to remind you."

"Good job reminding me," Zack said sarcastically.

Zack went off to what he called the cat's bathroom. It was the powder

room where PJ had her litter box.

"Damn cat," Zack grumbled as he got down to scoop out the clumped litter and other lovely treasures PJ had buried.

"What did you say?" Al asked poking his head around the door frame.

"Nothing."

"Did you say a bad word? You have to put a sorry in the Sorry Jar," Al told him sternly.

"You didn't even hear me. You don't know what I said," Zack told him as he got up and tied off the stinky bag.

"You said a bad word." Al was absolutely sure of this even though he couldn't have heard him very clearly.

Zack decided to admit his guilt and take his punishment.

"Fine. Write me a sorry. A little one," he told Al.

"You have to write it yourself. It's the rule." The rule was really meant for Al so he would take responsibility for what he did wrong and also practice his writing. But as usual Zack got caught in his own traps.

"We should have got a fish," Zack said as he threw away the bag and washed his hands.

"Can we have a fish?" Al said excitedly. He was bouncing up and down at the idea.

"No." Zack said to him, trying to undo the damage.

"You just said..."

"No, I didn't."

"We can have a fish. You said!" Al still persisted.

"No, we can't. PJ would eat it," Zack said finally finding a use for that cat.

"No, she wouldn't." Al denied it, but he also frowned worriedly. It would take just a little more convincing for this idea to take root.

"Yes, she would. She would eat it," Zack insisted. "Cats eat fish. You

saw the picture of a fish on her treats, didn't you?"

"OK." Al relented sadly.

Zack was a little surprised and pleased that his reason actually put an end to the wheedling. He wondered how many potential pets he could veto by citing PJ's carnivorous tendencies. Certainly all birds and amphibians would be on the list of potential casualties and off the list of potential pets. That left the problem of the dog Al was always asking for. PJ couldn't eat a dog, but maybe a dog could eat PJ. Zack stored away that argument for future use and hoped all this talk of pets eating each other wouldn't give Al nightmares. But he wasn't too worried. Al had always been a good sleeper and a sturdy, resilient kid.

Chapter 2

Even though he was an adult, Zack envied Al his steady, obstinate resolve. He credited his mother for that. Zack's own mother had died when he was young. He and his father lived quietly in the same house with his mother's memories for a few years. Then everything changed. They closed up the house and moved out. They were starting a new life. Zack now had a stepmother, Anne, and a little stepsister, Kelly. It wasn't too bad most of the time. And he and his father were a little happier and a little less lonely in their new life than they used to be.

They had ten good years of it before Zack's father died, and it all fell apart. Zack's stepmother unraveled. She used to have a drinking problem that Zack didn't even know about. After his father's death, Anne went back to drinking, more all the time. She deteriorated slowly until one day she drove herself into the back of a truck. Kelly was a teenager at the time. Zack was in college. Kelly would now have to go and live with her father, a man she had no contact with for ten years. She ran away rather than go back to live with him. Zack got a few phone calls from her, months apart. He offered to help her repeatedly. He begged her to tell him where she was, but she always refused.

Her last phone call to Zack was different. She asked him to come see her. Zack had been doing well after college. Having landed himself the kind of job he wanted, he could now afford a nice apartment and a new car. He dated happily without getting into any serious relationships. Except for the lack of a boyfriend, his life was exactly where he wanted it to be. He could help Kelly now more than ever. But instead of giving him hope, something about Kelly's phone call had chilled him. He took time off to go and see her. Her request had sounded serious, while Kelly herself had sounded strange over the phone.

Kelly had been renting a room in the back of an old lady's run down house. Zack encountered the old lady first. She told him that Kelly no longer had any money for rent, but the old lady, Mrs. Stillman, let her stay on and even helped her with the baby. Kelly had a child. That should have been the big news. Zack would have given anything if that had been her only news. But Zack barely glanced at the baby in

the crib as Mrs. Stillman showed him into Kelly's room then left. For a while Zack just stood there. Looking at Kelly had knocked the wind out of him. She was painfully thin and so pale she looked gray under a faded, blue blanket. But he had still recognized her right away just as if his sixteen year old stepsister was sitting in that ripped recliner.

Kelly was the first to speak.

"Look at you standing there like a dork. You still don't have a cool bone in your body, do you?" she teased him.

Zack couldn't say anything in reply. If he opened his mouth it would be to sob. Then a loud wail startled him out of his sadness. The baby was crying. And he was really loud.

"Listen to him. The lungs on that kid." Kelly pointed a thumb toward the crib. "Go pick him up," she told Zack.

Zack moved cautiously toward the crib. He couldn't imagine what kind of thing could be making that awful sound. He first saw the head of dark hair then the scrunched up red face of a baby. Zack picked him up, bringing the toothless, howling mouth even closer to his ear.

"Not so loud. Huh. Come on. Turn the volume down," he told the kid who did slow his crying then stopped.

"Is he stinky?" Kelly asked.

"Thank God, no," Zack told her.

"Too bad. I was going to make you change him." She smiled up at Zack. It was her familiar, evil smile.

"Is he your kid?" Zack asked. He felt a lump in his throat. He already knew the answer. It was just hard to believe. The child turned toward him. Now that he wasn't crying, he was chewing on his own hand instead, and his eyes were open. He had Kelly's big, dark eyes.

"What do you think? I'm babysitting?" Kelly said, scolding him for pretending not to know the answer. She could see him looking at her kid and recognizing him for who he was. Even if no one had said anything, Zack would have known him as Kelly's son as soon as the kid opened his eyes.

"Hey. I'm your uncle," Zack introduced himself. The kid ignored him due to his cannibalism. He was still trying to eat his own hand but

only managed to cover it in drool.

"Step-uncle," Kelly corrected him. She had to just to uphold the tradition. She had always done the same thing whenever he introduced her to anyone as his sister. But when Zack's father introduced her to people as his daughter, she didn't say anything. She only looked shyly at her shoes.

Kelly had acute leukemia and she was dying. Knowing she had no future, she had gotten in touch with Zack. She needed to see him so she could ask him to adopt her son, Al. As she asked this of him, she told him to put the baby down so she could tell him why.

For the first time, Zack heard the reason why Kelly had run away rather than go and live with her father after her mother died. The man had beaten both Kelly and her mother. When Kelly was five, he broke her arm. That was the last straw. Her mother finally came to her senses. She took Kelly and ran away. Years later, when Kelly was faced with the choice of going back to live with her father, she ran away too.

But now she was afraid for her baby. After her death, her father, as the closest living relative, could get his hands on her son. Not trusting the rest of her family, who had defended her father and made excuses for him, she got desperate. She told Zack if he didn't adopt Al, she didn't know what she would do. She couldn't let him go to her father after what he had done to her.

Zack couldn't even imagine how difficult it was for her. It would be too much for anyone to wait to die, to suffer, and to think about her own child going to a man who had broken his daughter's arm when she was so little and helpless.

Zack’s father had always wanted to adopt Kelly. He called her his daughter until Kelly called him Dad. But Kelly's mother was too afraid to let Zack's dad adopt her daughter. After they had no contact with Kelly’s father for so long, Anne was afraid it would draw her ex husband back into their lives, set him off. Kelly's mother had told her about this only after Zack's father died. She wanted Kelly to know that he loved her as his daughter and wanted to make it official but couldn't.

As Kelly told him this, Zack thought about his father, how much he had wanted to be Kelly's father too. The baby made a noise, and Zack

looked his way. The little guy was kicking his feet in the crib. He needed Zack as did Kelly. She was finally letting him help her, and he was just standing there speechless. As Zack considered such a momentous decision, it was like his dad came to stand next to him. Looking down at Kelly huddled in her armchair while her baby fussed in his crib, Zack knew there was only one possible decision. How could he let all of them down, Kelly, his dad, and baby Al? Though he was gripped by fear and sadness, Zack agreed. He hired a lawyer to make sure the adoption was airtight, that Al could never be taken away from him. And then Zack signed every paper he was given to sign, and made Al his son.

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As Zack scrambled to find somewhere to put Al for the rest of the day during the summer, Mia kept mentioning her live in, gay nanny as an option. Her kid didn't need a nanny any more, and this was as strong a reference as he could hope for. Still, Zack just didn't feel comfortable with that kind of arrangement. Now Mia was asking to have lunch with him. He was busy and tried to put her off, but she insisted. Mia was mainly a work friend and Yuka's protégé. She and Zack often had lunch together, and she had even given him good parenting advice when he was stumped and desperate for it. Though she was a feisty, little blonde, she was unexpectedly sensible and not usually so pushy. As an excuse, she claimed to have important news to share, so Zack had to agree to lunch. She dragged him out of the office and off to an outdoor table at a nearby restaurant. But as they ate lunch, all she wanted to talk about was how perfect her nanny would be for Zack.

"Because he's gay?" Zack concluded.

"Yes."

"And because I'm gay?"

"Yes," she admitted without hesitation. "Mark has been great with Dorie. He's wonderful and trustworthy."

"And you picked him up off the street, as I recall." Zack knew some of the history from what Mia had told him before.

"He was never on the street. I told you very clearly that I took him in when his family threw him out. He didn't spend one minute on the street. I made sure of it. He had been babysitting Dorie for months

before that happened. He was an angel. Oh God it was so sad when his family did that to him. He's such a good kid, and he's been so much help."

"He's a kid?" Zack said. That was one strike against him.

"He was a kid. He's nineteen now and going to college part time. He said he could arrange his schedule around Al's. He is perfect."

Zack stopped with his fork midway to his mouth.

"You mean you already mentioned this to him?" Zack said not liking it at all. He hated for this guy to be disappointed when he wasn't offered the job that Mia had as much as promised him.

"I had to make sure he was willing to work for you. I wasn't a hundred percent sure he wanted to have another nanny job. But he agreed to consider it. Now you need to meet him and see what a good guy he is," Mia said.

"Then why are you throwing him out on his ass?"

"I would never do that," she said defensively. Then she leaned forward. "OK. Here is my big news. But you are not to say anything to anyone. You hear me?"

"Yes."

She started out by whispering but then her voice rose uncontrollably.

"Frank is getting transferred to Spain. Can you believe it?! Freaking Spain! Shh," she said even though she was the one who had nearly shouted. "I am so glad I took Spanish in high school and college and not French. If I hadn't, I would be kicking myself so hard right now." She was nearly breathless as she talked. It was understandable. This was a big deal. "But I don't want anyone to know about the transfer yet. I mean, Yuka knows of course. At this point the transfer is a sure thing. It just hasn't bee officially announced yet."

Zack congratulated her. She took a break to sip her club soda and take a bite of her salad before continuing.

"When we go, we can't take Mark. And anyway, Dorie doesn't need him any more. He has already been feeling like he doesn't contribute enough and looking for a job. I'm telling you, you better snap him up before he finds something better."

"Maybe he should just get another job."

"Come on. He doesn't just need some minimum wage job. He needs a job and soon a place to live too. And he is a perfect angel. You will kick yourself, and I will kick you, and Al will kick you too if you miss out on this opportunity."

"Bullshit. You just want to stash him at my place so you don't have to feel guilty for ditching him to go frolicking in Spain," Zack accused her.

"It's still a great opportunity for you. You can't do better than Mark. I'm telling you, you'll regret it."

"I'll give it all due consideration," Zack promised her.

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Roy was down for the weekend, but Mark wasn't even sure he wanted to see him. That is, if Roy could find time for him this visit. It had happened before. Roy would give him some half-assed apology for leaving for college without ever seeing him.

"You know how it is," Roy would say.

And then Mark would want to remind him that he didn't. He didn't know what it was like to go to college full time at his parents' expense. Mark didn't know what it was like not to have to work to support himself. He didn't know what it was like to be busy with one's own family. The last thing Roy knew and Mark didn't want to know about was what it was like to have a girlfriend.

Mark would find out if Roy had time for him when he called, giving him no notice. He would demand that Mark meet him somewhere because he needed him. He had to see Mark. He was dying for him, only him. Then Mark would feel his insides melt and he would go.

This time Roy wanted to meet at their old place. It was a big rock inside the small nature preserve near the dry riverbed. It was a hidden spot where the two of them had sneaked away to play as kids. Later it was where they sometimes fooled around. Mark arrived first and waited. When he showed up, Roy's face was red as he climbed up to him. He had run over to their old meeting place like he used to in the old days. Mark had to admit that his enthusiasm touched him.

"Couldn't get the car," Roy said, out of breath as he searched Mark's face for signs that he hadn't lost him.

Roy always needed to be reassured that Mark still wanted him, hadn't forgotten about him. Breathless and sweaty, Roy slowly leaned into him, pressed him to the rock. Mark waited for his next move. Roy was looking at his mouth. Mark wondered if he might kiss him. He hardly ever did. When he did kiss Mark, it was always a fast and hard kiss. It would be over before Roy could learn to enjoy it and risk becoming gay full time.

That was Roy's game of denial. He wasn't really gay. He just wanted Mark because of the bond they shared, only Mark. That's if you didn't count all the girls Roy fucked.

That's why he and Roy didn't kiss often, and it was never a sweet, slow kiss that Mark wanted from a lover. But that wasn't who Roy was. He was once Mark’s best friend. Now he was just a guy he couldn't stay away from. Being with Roy called to mind everything Mark was missing. The touch he craved wasn't Roy's hurried, desperate groping. Though he was turned on by it, Mark's mind flew away into the arms of some other man. Grinding against him, Roy was moaning. Hungry for more, he undid Mark's fly. He handled his cock through his boxers then pulled everything down. With his hands on Mark's ass, he pulled him close. He kissed his neck before saying Mark's name. Mark unzipped Roy, who groaned at the touch of his hand. Mark slipped a condom on him then applied lube. He turned around so Roy could fuck him against that rock. Mark prepared himself for Roy's usual clumsy entry. He clamped his mouth shut and shuddered as Roy slipped in too fast, too far. Roy pushed in again and Mark hissed.

"This is the best," Roy said, pulling back slowly.

This wasn't the kind of fucking Mark fantasized about. He wanted Roy inside him because it was the only way he could have him. But it wasn’t so bad while he took it slow. But soon they were out of sync again as Roy lost patience for a slow fuck and rushed to the finish.

It never felt right with Roy, and it never would. That hope had died a long time ago. Maybe now he only used Roy to remind himself that there was no right man for him, that he didn't exist. There were only more guys like Roy. Mark had been with a few, and it was always the same. He would get off and never want to see the guy again.

Roy came with a loud grunt, leaving Mark hard and unsatisfied. After

some heavy breathing, Roy noticed his erection. He took it in his hand and stroked slowly.

Since Roy had started college, Mark saw him much less often, and their rare sessions lasted longer to make up for lost time. Now that Roy had lost his impatience, he took it easy. Roy handled his cock tenderly, letting the pleasure build. Roy's eyes went from the working of his fist on Mark's cock up to Mark's flushed face. He groped Mark's ass with his free hand in rhythm to his pumping. He let Mark take his time coming like never before.

Roy had always rushed him, squeezed hard, fingered him to make it happen faster. On special occasions, he liked to give Mark a slow hand job and watch him come. He had only used his mouth on Mark once. It was after Mark was thrown out of the house because of him and living at Mia's. Roy had begged to see Mark then he begged to be forgiven. Roy was so desperate and wanted to prove himself so badly, he kneeled in front of Mark and sucked him off for the first and last time.

Thinking back to that, Mark came over Roy's hand, which he went to wash off immediately.

Being indulged like this told Mark that it would be a while before he saw Roy again.

And it was true. Roy told him that he would be going away for most of the summer. His uncle in Canada had invited him for a visit. He promised they would see each other as soon as he got back.

As Roy told him all about his summer plans, the two of them were sitting, sprawled against their rock. "Our rock" that's what they had called it when they were boys. Now coming here was just a nod to nostalgia. They were not boys. They were not best friends for life. And the rock was just a big, meaningless slab they leaned against.

Mark knew that Roy was his past. But he still gave in to him whenever he called begging to see him. Some part of Mark didn't want to admit that he and Roy had no future, and an even bigger part of him just didn't want to let go of a piece of his past that he could still keep. These days Mark had so little to hold onto. He was even going to be losing Mia and her family soon. Mark was happy and excited for them. Though Dorie was a little nervous, Mia was thrilled about the move to Spain. But Mark already felt lonely and even abandoned though he had no right to feel that way. The Prestons had been so good to him,

better than his own family. He would miss them. Now that his life with them was coming to an end, Mark was worried about his future. He wondered if his future lay with this Zack Warner and his son, Al, at least for a little while.

Chapter 3

Zack visited some day camps and rejected them all for different reasons. When he pictured his Al there, they were never good enough. Having looked at the other options, Zack had to admit that Mia's idea was sounding better all the time. After he got home from work, he dropped into the chair in his office and put his feet up on the desk. He called her to see if her guy was still available.

"He is, and I can send him over whenever you want," Mia told him a little too eagerly.

"Send him where?" Zack asked not liking the sound of this.

"To your house."

"No."

"You want to meet at a coffee shop or something?" She asked. He could hear some noise at her end that sounded like the TV was on.

"That's too much like a date," Zack said. It wouldn't be if he wasn't meeting with a young, gay guy, but he was.

"Fine, meet him at my house," Mia offered.

Zack considered that, but that didn't sound right either so he rejected the idea. He thought about the particulars for the first time. This guy needed a place to live and a job. Possibly Zack might be providing him with both. If he was going to take this seriously, and apparently he was since he wouldn't otherwise be meeting him just to jerk him around, he needed to show him where he would be living.

"He should see the house," Zack decided.

"OK! That way you can see how he looks sitting on your furniture," Mia said like she wanted to sabotage the whole deal.

"You are going to make me change my mind," Zack warned her.

"Oh, please. It's a done deal. I know I'm right about this."

"That's nice. But I need to know that he's right for Al. He'll be living

with us. It can't be just on your say-so."

"You'll know when you meet him. Now I have to warn you. He is a good looking guy. His mother, if you can call that bitch his mother. Anyway, his mother is half Asian and gorgeous. His father is Hispanic and a really good looking guy and an asshole. But Mark is an absolute sweetheart."

"Why are you telling me about his ethnic makeup?" Zack asked her.

"So you can picture him."

"Why do I need to picture him? I'm hiring him to take care of Al." Zack was feeling a little exasperated with her.

"I just thought you might feel a little uncomfortable having such a good looking, young guy in your house so I wanted to prepare you."

"Why? What? Why... Why are you making it sound like there's never been a good looking guy in my house? And what am I, Quasimodo?"

"Oh, you're OK, I guess."

"Thanks!"

"I'm sure some OK guys have been at your house. Or have they?" she asked skeptical that he would ever bring a date home. "Anyway. It's different when someone is there full time who looks so tempting, but you're supposed to keep your hands off. Plus you have no social life, do you? So this might be a real challenge for you."

"Gee, Mia, you think he'll be safe with me?" Zack asked with heavy sarcasm, but Mia answered him with a challenge.

"You tell me after you meet him."

"Oh my God. It's off. The meeting is off."

"Don't be a baby."

It was true that Zack didn't bring men home, or take them anywhere much either. His involvements were few, brief and shallow. If he even went on a date and didn't see potential immediately, he would end it right there. He wasn't going to waste his time in pointless conversation with someone he didn't care about when he could be spending time with Al. Maybe it was too much to ask to feel an instant connection with someone, but spending time away from Al had to be

worth it. And even the occasional one night stand didn't seem worth it sometimes. He did still indulge in them now and again, just to refresh his memory on the subject.

The following evening, Zack settled himself next to Al for their nightly book reading. But before he started, he wanted to talk to him and remind him what was happening the next day. Zack kissed his hair, and Al wiped at the spot.

"You wiped it off?" Zack complained.

Al wiped again just in case there was any trace of the kiss left.

"That's it. Give it back," Zack demanded putting out his hand like Al was supposed to give him something tangible.

"What?" Al asked his crazy dad.

"The kiss. Give it back."

"How?"

"Here." Zack pointed to the top of his own head.

Al understood but refused with a shake of his head and a loud "No!"

As a compromise, Zack pointed to his cheek. After considering the spot, Al agreed.

"OK." He gave Zack a loud, smacking kiss. But then he wiped the kiss right off Zack's face.

"You wiped it off? Now you have to give it back again," Zack told him.

Al sighed and gave him another kiss. This time he didn't wipe it off just shook his head at how crazy his father was.

"You know, you only have to wipe it off when a lady kisses you," he told Al. That was his own rule, but why shouldn't he pass it on to his son.

Al looked puzzled by this new information, but he didn't disagree. He did demand that Zack start reading.

"Hold on. You remember that Mark is coming over tomorrow," Zack reminded him.

"To see if you like him," Al said to confirm that he remembered.

"Not like him." Zack denied it only because of the way it sounded. What Al said was basically true. "I want to see if he's the right guy to help take care of you."

"And I have to stay with Miss Olga," Al said with a pout.

"Yes, you do," Zack confirmed.

"I don't like Miss Olga. She makes me do homework even when I don't have any," Al complained.

"Maybe she'll play the piano for you." Zack doubted it, but sometimes when she was in a good mood, she did play for Al.

"Piano lessons are extra," Al parroted Miss Olga's often repeated warning if Al went anywhere near her piano.

Zack had originally signed up Al for Miss Olga's piano lessons after kindergarten because she lived so close, and it doubled as babysitting. Miss Olga saw right through that ploy. Neither Zack nor Al wanted piano lessons for him so it was just as well when Miss Olga refused to teach him after only two failed lessons. Miss Olga had deemed Al incorrigible and also too young and undisciplined. But she was willing to allow him to stay with her but for no more than two hours on the condition that Al behaved himself like a young gentleman. In Miss Olga's book, that meant that he shouldn't disturb her TV watching.

Sometimes Al sat in on her piano lessons with other kids. He didn't like that because he had to be even more quiet so he wouldn't distract the student during his or her lesson. But most of the time, there was only Al and the TV to keep Miss Olga company. She was not Al's favorite person, but Zack wasn't worried about Miss Olga's grouchiness. All Zack cared about was that he could trust her. Since Al didn't have any living grandparents, not any worth knowing anyway, it wasn't a bad thing for him to spend some quality time with a grumpy, old person. And maybe it would make him appreciate Zack a little more.

The next day after work, Zack delivered Al and a takeout dinner for two to Miss Olga's. That was their arrangement if Zack dropped Al off after five. Zack had her favorite Chinese food memorized by now. Most of the time when Zack had her watch Al in the evenings, it meant he had a date. This time he was meeting Mark.

Back home, Zack took a look around his house to try and see it from the perspective of a potential nanny. He only saw the house he grew up in and gave up trying to see it any other way. When Mark called to say that he was on his way, Zack had offered to get him dinner as well. But Mark said he already ate. Zack ate a little as he waited. But he found he was too nervous to really chow down.

He was relieved when he heard Mark's light knock.

First thing after introductions, Mark pointed to the warning sign attached to the front door. It was on both sides. It read "Careful! Don't let the cat out."

"Yes, there is a cat," Zack said. But PJ proved her own existence by rubbing against Mark's legs. The slut. Mark bent down to pet the slutty cat.

"You didn't have her declawed? That's good," Mark said.

Zack was surprised he had noticed. He shrugged.

"I couldn't do that. Especially to PJ. You see the note up there." Zack pointed a thumb at the front door. "She's always trying to sneak out. One of these days, she'll be out there, maybe lost. I want her armed and able to defend herself."

Mark smiled, nodded in approval and straightened up from petting PJ. He looked around the place as Zack looked at him. The first thing Zack noticed was his eyes, dark and ... No, not pretty. That was not the right way to think about this guy. But Zack couldn't help looking at him the way he would look at any other attractive man. And he was definitely attractive, stunningly attractive. He had broad shoulders and a lean but strong looking body. He was no more than an inch shorter than Zack. That put him in a perfect position for Zack to look into his eyes. Those dark eyes, almost black, were made for a lover to get lost in them. His hair was dark brown and soft looking not coarse like Zack's. His skin was just a little darker than Al's. Zack was going to look as pasty as a cheap Band-Aid next to them.

"I'll show you around since this place is part of the deal," Zack said as he led the way through the house. "Mia thinks you are a saint. Are you?" Zack was almost prepared to believe him if he said he was.

"No."

"You'll kind of need to be," Zack said, and he wasn't joking. "No booze,

no drugs, no swearing. No having guys over, or anyone actually, not even friends. For now anyway. We can..."

"That's fine," Mark agreed. His agreeing so quickly didn't mean that he would really follow those rules, but Zack felt sure of his good intentions. What he didn't trust was his youth. But more than that, Zack didn't trust himself around him.

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Zack Warner's house was in a nicer neighborhood than Mia's. There were a lot of big, older houses there just like the one Mark was approaching. He liked the feel of the neighborhood. The street was lined with tall trees and lush gardens. There was a wide sidewalk too. But he worried that the people living there might be too old fashioned to be gay friendly.

He pulled into the driveway next to a beige, late model Pathfinder, a parent's car. After taking some deep breaths, Mark knocked lightly. He hated an obnoxious, loud knock and figured other people did too. He was apprehensive as he waited for the front door to be opened. Then there was Zack giving him a quick smile and rushing him through the door so he could close it before the cat sneaked out. Mark met Zack then PJ. PJ's fur was striped black and brown and silky rather than fluffy. Mark focused on her rather than Zack. He wanted to get himself under control.

Mark had started out being just plain nervous, but now he was nervous in a different way. He couldn't remember having such a strong reaction to any guy he had ever met. And he had certainly met more attractive men than Zack. But there was something about him. He was good looking in an unimpressive, blue eyed, dirty blond sort of way. Zack was only a hair's breadth taller than Mark but more solid and filled out. There was an easy masculinity about him of a young father and a family man, but also a sense of fun. His voice was just deep enough to tickle Mark's spine but still pleasant and unassuming. And he spoke like he didn't want anything he said to be taken too seriously. Though he must have been judging and evaluating Mark for the job, Mark didn't feel scrutinized. He only felt welcomed into his home.

Now that he was a little more used to the effect Zack had on him, Mark turned his attention to Zack's home. It was a sprawling, one

story house. On the floor, beige carpet alternated with beige tiles. The living room was large and furnished in an old fashioned but comfortable way that surprised Mark. It didn't look like a thirty year old gay guy's house.

As if he could tell what Mark was thinking, Zack explained.

"It used to be my parents' house. I moved in here when I got Al." Zack smiled as soon as he mentioned his son. "I didn't think my apartment was right for him. And I guess, it made me feel less alone. I was scared to be raising him by myself. Here I felt like my parents were watching over me and wouldn't let me screw up too bad. God, I wish they could have met Al," he said wistfully. Then he pulled himself out of that mood. "OK, I'm done being sentimental and embarrassing myself. For now. Until I start telling you about Al's mother."

Zack looked sad when he said that last thing though a smile still lingered on his face through the sadness. After pointing out his office, he led Mark past the living room and down a hallway. He showed him the door to his own bedroom. He opened it quickly, but they didn't go in. Next Zack led him to the guest room that would be Mark's if he got the job. Mark liked it fine, especially the private bathroom he would be getting. The furniture was old fashioned like in the rest of the house, but that was okay. Mark had glimpsed the same kind of furniture in Zack's bedroom too.

"I haven't changed much in here. Al's room used to be my room." Zack showed him the kid's room next.

The first thing he pointed out was one of the pictures on the bedside table.

"That's Al's mother, my stepsister. She had me adopt Al because she knew she was dying. She had acute myeloid leukemia. It had progressed too far before she even knew she had it. She was gone so fast." Zack's voice was very thick when he said this. It was almost like he was forcing the words out. Mark could see that he was teary eyed.

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Zack noticed that Mark let him stare at that picture of Kelly and Al without any impatience or discomfort. He felt as if Mark might be capable of waiting forever for Zack to pull himself together. The picture Zack had showed him on Al's night stand was of Kelly, already

looking a little pale, holding baby Al in the crook of her arm. Zack only told a few people who she was. Kelly's family didn't know anything about Al, and he wanted to keep it that way.

Al knew all about her. He knew that the dark haired girl in the picture was his mother because Zack had told him that since the first night he spent without her. Al knew that she loved him and that she was gone. Zack wished that he had more pictures of Kelly. Her mother had kept the family photos. After she died, Zack didn't know what happened to them. He only had a handful of pictures, all framed and placed around the house. In most of them, Kelly was still a kid. There was one of Kelly with his dad. On the back, it was labeled "Father and Daughter" in his father's handwriting. That picture used to sit on Dad's desk along with ones of him and Zack and another of him and Kelly's mother. The sun used to hit it so it was a little faded now. With his father's arm around her, Kelly was smiling, and his father was too. Though there was no resemblance between them, they did look unmistakably like father and daughter.

That was the next picture Zack showed Mark as they went back to the living room. Mark said that Zack looked just like his father.

"I'll take that as a compliment. I wish I was more like him in other ways. He was a top notch dad."

"I'm sure you do fine," Mark said not overdoing the reassurance since he couldn't back it up with any first hand knowledge. "When you got Al, was it just you?" he asked.

"No. My friend, Louise, moved in to help me out. That's her." Zack pointed out another photo on the side table full of them. In it, Louise had a big grin as she held on to baby Al in the back yard while he tried to walk. Her red hair was unruly from the wind, but she looked pretty good anyway. Zack told Mark more about her. "When I got Al, she had just broken up with a guy she was living with. She was kind of depressed. I wasn't doing so well either since Kelly had just died. And I thought, hey, two depressed people are better than one. Actually, having to take care of Al was good for both of us. She grew really attached to Al. But then she got married and moved to Boston."

"You guys must miss her," Mark said turning his eyes to Zack with a look of understanding.

"We do. Actually she met Jack, her husband, because of Al. We were taking Al for a check up, and Jack was working as a nurse at one of

the other doctor's offices in the building. She struck up an instant friendship with him, but she thought he was gay."

"Because he was a male nurse," Mark guessed. Zack wondered if he was sensitive to those kinds of assumptions since he was a male nanny. Of course, he actually was gay.

"That and Jack is really buff. It was a good thing that she thought he was gay. Louise gets really nervous around hot, straight guys and makes a complete fool of herself. By the time she found out Jack wasn't gay, he had already fallen for her. She did make a fool of herself later, but it didn't hurt her case as much."

"It must have been hard on Al when she left."

"He was still little so it wasn't too hard. After Louise moved away, we had Mrs. Krinos for a while. Al learned a little Greek from her then forgot it all when she left to live closer to her daughter. Then these two sisters, Molly and Dianna, took turns watching Al during the day. They were college students like you. They were fun and Al loved them. Then they graduated, and we got PJ." To confirm that he meant PJ, the cat, Zack nodded at her. She was busy trying to wrap herself around Mark's leg. She was shameless.

"So you don't even need me," Mark concluded.

"Oh, we need you. Cats make terrible nannies. This one is always leaving Al in the hot car while she goes off to score catnip so she can get blitzed and gamble away her paycheck."

Mark shook his head in disapproval at the cat, but then he petted her. Zack had never before wished so hard that he was a cat.

Mark's visit had left Zack smiling as he went to the car to drive to Miss Olga's. When he picked him up, Al was full of questions. He pestered Zack about Mark the whole drive back. Zack told him a few things, but not too much. He wanted Al to make up his own mind about Mark.

Mia must have already debriefed Mark by the time she called Zack. Zack assured her that he would have called her eventually if she hadn't beaten him to it. She scoffed at that.

"What did you think?" she pressed him.

"You mean when can he move in?"

"Really? That's great," Mia said jumping way ahead based on a little bit of sarcasm.

"What? No. I was being sarcastic. I'm considering this carefully. I will let Mark know my decision," Zack said to let her know that she wouldn't be the first one he called.

"You're leaving me out of the loop?" Mia asked, appalled that her role as a middle-woman was already over.

"Yes. Mark is an adult. Right?" Zack reminded her.

"Fine. But I want to be the second to know," she demanded.

"How about the fourth?" Zack offered.

"Come on."

"I'm first. Then Al then Mark," Zack explained the pecking order to her.

"OK, fine. Al before Mark?"

"I'll want them to meet before I make it final." Then Zack changed the subject a little bit to ask her, "How did he end up living with you exactly?"

He knew the story but not all the details. Now that he had met Mark, he wanted to know more. Mia filled in the blanks.

"Well, I kind of thought he might be gay. He was babysitting for us one night. He came over just as we were waiting for this really cute guy to finish fixing our internet connection then we were going to leave for our monthly dinner and a movie. That's when I saw how Mark looked at this cute guy, and I knew. He was adorable around him." Here Mia's voice grew more serious. "I was a little worried about Mark's parents though. Some things I heard about them nagged at me. Something about the church they went to. I asked some of our former neighbors about his parents. I told you we used to live near them before we moved, that's when Mark started babysitting for us. But he did it even after that. He just rode his bike to our house. Anyway, the neighbors said his parents were really conservative. And I was thinking ‘Uh-oh’. So I had a little talk with Mark and told him not to come out to his parents until he was out of the house and independent

from them. Kids can be so impulsive and not think about practical things. And I also told him if anything ever happened, that we would help him and to come to us."

"That was nice of you." Zack was genuinely touched, and that wasn't the big stuff yet.

Mia continued.

"I didn't realize what would happen though. I said it just in case. But late one night, there is Mark at our front door. We saw him through the window. He was afraid to knock and so apologetic when we opened the door. Now this is late November, and he has just been thrown out on the street by his parents because he was caught with some boy. I was ready to drive over to his parents' house and kill them. But I didn't. Anyway, that sweet boy asked if he could sleep in our garage for the night. Can you imagine? He looked so pale and cold and sad. And I still didn't go and kill his parents. I should get a medal."

"You should, for that and for other reasons," Zack praised her.

"I actually thought it was temporary. That he would only stay with us until we could find him somewhere else to live. Until then, he watched Dorie for us and did all sorts of things to help out. He went to school too. But there was nowhere else for him to go and live. Some of his relatives just refused outright to have him. And others made excuses. By then, Frank and I were used to having Mark around. He's so quiet and helpful, plus we knew we could trust him. So we made him our live in nanny. At first he wouldn't let us pay him. He was so grateful. It broke my heart. But he did later. I think because he wanted to go to college and needed the money."

"You're a nice lady." That was an understatement.

"Oh, give him the job already."

"Stop nagging."

Hearing more of what happened to Mark made Zack wonder about his own motive for wanting to hire him. And it wasn't because Mark was hot. If anything, that was an obstacle. Zack just couldn't help thinking about Kelly and how he had failed her when she needed a safe place to live. Mia saved Mark from living on the street. Mark could probably manage better now that he was older, but he wouldn't have to. Zack still suspected that he wanted to give Mark a home, not just a job, and

that worried him. But he also felt like the decision was already made. He made it as soon as he met Mark.

Chapter 4

On his second visit to Zack's house, the place already felt more familiar. Since he was about to meet the kid, Mark looked again at the photos of Al on the side table. Al was pictured from the days when he was a baby to some very recent pictures with the cat. Zack was holding Al in some of the pictures, the proud, happy father in every way. In one photo, Zack was holding Al while Al was holding the very small PJ as a kitten. There were also pictures of Al's mother as a young girl. There was an unmistakable resemblance between her as a kid and Al. It was sad to think that Al would only know her second hand.

As Mark waited in the living room for Zack to bring in his son for their first meeting, he could hear the murmur of Zack telling the kid about him. Zack's deep, more even tones were punctuated by the higher, unmodulated sounds of a child's voice. Mark waited for the father to bring the boy in, but the little boy ran into the living room ahead of him.

"Him?" the boy said pointing at Mark with his arm straight out.

"Yes. That's Mark. The rude one is Al." That's how Zack introduced them to each other. He had a very casual attitude toward his kid. That's not what Mark expected since Mia had warned him that Zack was uptight and overprotective of his kid.

The boy regarded Mark very seriously. Finally he said, "Hi" as if to sum up all his conclusions about Mark in that one word.

"Hi. Nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you too," the boy parroted, stringing the words together without giving them any meaning. He seemed almost unfriendly, very direct while at the same time cautious. He looked a little older than in any of the pictures Mark had seen of him. That wasn't unusual for a child his age. His father would have to take pictures every minute and frame them right away to keep up with his growth. Mark liked that Al wasn't skinny or frail but more robust. Good for him. He had dark, curious eyes and his complexion had some brown in it, like Mark's. As Al was slowly coming in for a closer look, Mark was surprised that Zack kept completely out of the way like nothing significant was going

on. He was only watching Al's progress with an amused expression.

"I have a cat," Al announced suddenly.

"I saw her," Mark said.

"Dad put her in there so she wouldn't bother us," Mark pointed toward the den. "But she has her feather thing and the ball to play with."

"That's good."

"Let's go see my room," Al said and took Mark by the hand. "You can come too," he said to his dad.

"Oh, can I? Thank you so much," his father mocked him.

"My dad is weird, but he isn't a bad guy," Al said in his defense.

"High praise," Zack grumbled behind them.

Al looked up at Mark as if to say "See?"

Zack stayed by the door as Al showed Mark around the room. He introduced various toys with Zack sometimes prompting him to say who gave them to him as a way of teaching him gratitude.

Coming to his bedside table and the two pictures there, Al said, "That's me and Dad. And that's my mom." He said it in a way Mark had never heard anyone say it before. It was like in his heart, Al wasn't quite sure what the word "Mom" really meant. For a while now, Mark hadn't known either. Was it that face at the door telling him to never come back? Or was it that same face years earlier, leaning over him with concern, then smiling with relief that his fever had gone down? Unlike Mark's mother, Al's mother wasn't part of his memory. She was just someone his father had told him about.

Al gave him almost the same tour of the house as Zack had but found different features of interest like where PJ liked to hide and where she liked to sleep. When they went in the kitchen, Mark noticed the same thing that caught his eye the last time. During that tour, Mark had looked at Zack for an explanation. Zack had said, "I'll let Al tell you about those."

That let Mark know that he was going to be coming back for a second interview with Zack’s son.

Now Al pointed at two glass jars on the kitchen counter, the same

ones Mark had been curious about before. They were labeled "Al" and "Dad" and full of pieces of paper with writing on them. Mark didn't even have to ask. Al was ready to tell him all about them.

"That's the Sorry Jars. The big one is Dad's. This one is mine. It's from jam. Dad's is from spaghetti sauce. See?"

"I see. And inside there?" Mark prompted him.

"That's the sorrys."

"Aha."

"It's like a swear jar but with ..." Zack started to explain, but Al cut him off.

"I'm telling him!" Al opened the jar and took out one of the papers from the smaller jar. "Here. This one is from when I pulled PJ's tail. See?" The note said "Sorry PJ" and had a drawing of what might have been a cat. Al pointed at the picture to help Mark decipher it. "That's PJ. That's PJ's tail. It was sticking up, and I pulled on it. It was funny." Al giggled at the memory of his mischief.

"No, it wasn't," his father corrected him. "PJ didn't think it was funny, did she? You do that again, PJ will bite your nose off."

"No, she won't. She wouldn't do that."

"Just try it, and she'll bite it right off."

Al did a pout and furrow combination that expressed a healthy skepticism, indignation and a dose of fear at losing his nose to an angry cat.

"You might be glad that your nose is gone when PJ starts using your pillow as a litter box," Zack threatened some more.

"No!"

"Be nice to PJ. Now tell Mark what happens when we have ten."

"When there's ten of them in Dad's jar, I get to have a scoop of ice cream, and he can't have any. And when I have ten, Dad gets to have a beer, and I don't get to have any."

"OK," Mark said as he and Zack smiled at each other over the fairness of this arrangement.

"What kind of jar do we give Mark?" Al asked his dad.

"Mark doesn't need a jar."

"Yes, he does. For when he's bad and has to say he's sorry."

"Mark..." Zack started to say, but Al was already consulting Mark about this issue.

"You want the peanut butter one?" Al asked seeing a peanut butter jar that was left on the counter. Mark noticed that it was the natural kind not just regular peanut butter.

"It still has peanut butter in it, doesn't it?" Mark pointed out, but Al didn't think that was an obstacle.

"We'll eat it."

"Not now, we won't," his dad told him.

Al went off and looked in the recycling bin. He brought back a pickle jar.

"Here's one. But it's too small." Al held up the jar for his father and Mark to look at. Zack took it from him.

"It's not too small. It's fine. We'll wash it. See, Mark, this is your Sorry Jar." Zack proceeded to wash out the pickle jar then dry it.

Al pointed to a note pad next to the two Sorry Jars.

"You put in a big sorry for big things, and little one for little things, and a medium one for medium things."

"We get it," Zack said.

"What about his punishment when he has ten?" Al asked him.

"We'll eat umm ... cookies and he can't have any," Zack proposed off the top of his head.

"Chocolate chip?" Al asked eagerly.

"Sure, chocolate chip."

Al agreed with a nod.

"I'll put his name on," Al said and tore a piece of paper off the notepad. Then he looked at Mark expectantly. Mark spelled his name slowly while Al painstakingly wrote out each letter. He presented them to Mark for inspection and approval one at a time.

"You write really well," Mark told him.

"I'm almost in first grade," Al said, proud of himself.

Once Mark's name was written crookedly on the paper, Al got some scotch tape. His father took it away from him.

"I've seen you use scotch tape. It's good for a laugh, and that's about it."

"I put sticky tape on PJ once," Al boasted with an evil chuckle.

"And I had to remove it," Zack jumped in to complain about that ordeal and glare at Al. "I almost lost an eye. That was a big sorry wasn't it?" he reminded Al.

Al only laughed some more.

Al went off to get some of his drawings to show Mark. Though Zack was about to offer him the job, Mark beat him to it and took the opportunity to find out where things stood.

"There's a Sorry Jar with my name on it. Does that mean I'm in?" he asked Zack.

"You wouldn't be meeting Al if you weren't in," Zack said.

"I thought this was my second interview to get approval from Al."

"Oh, I knew Al would love you."

Mark smiled and turned away a little embarrassed.

Zack let Al display and explain some of his drawings, which all looked the same and were mostly of PJ. Then he wanted Al to give them some space.

"Go in my office and play with PJ. Mark and I are going to talk."

"Why? What are you going to talk about?" Al asked, making no move to go.

"Grown up stuff. Now do you want PJ to stay all alone in there all day?"

"No."

"Then go."

Al looked at him suspiciously as he left to join the cat in her seclusion.

"Let's do an orientation while I got you here," Zack said after Al was gone. "Al will be in kindergarten for a little while longer." Zack considered that good timing. He didn't want Mark to feel overwhelmed before he had a chance to settle in. "You'll have a few days with Al out of your hair to adjust to the house and ease into things."

Mark looked like he was glad about that too.

"You don't speak Spanish, do you?" Zack asked.

"Only a few words," Mark sounded like he was wondering why he asked.

"I thought I could squeeze some language lessons out of you, but never mind," Zack said. Unfortunately, as he said this, he also made a suggestive squeezing motion with his hand.

Mark raised an eyebrow, and Zack quickly put away his hand. Mark smiled at him. His smile was just too much. Zack hoped he wasn't blushing.

Moving the conversation back into the kitchen, Zack came to the real reason he wanted Al out of earshot. He told Mark more about Kelly and her family. He wanted Mark to know what had been her greatest fear for Al, and what was now Zack's fear.

"No one in Kelly's family knows that she had a child, much less that I adopted him. And it has to stay that way," Zack said to him. "It's unlikely that anyone will ever approach you. But it's kind of a nightmare of mine that someone from Kelly's family will show up and try to take Al, either legally or just grab him," Zack admitted.

"I know that the most important part of my job is keeping Al safe," Mark said. Zack could see that he was taking this as seriously as he wanted him to.

"Obviously this is about Kelly's father, but it applies to anyone who might claim to be a relative or even a friend," Zack explained.

"Unless I hear from you that it's OK, no one goes near Al," Mark said to show Zack he understood. It was what Zack needed to hear.

"Oh, and don't ever be late picking up Al from anywhere. I have an issue with that," Zack said with a frown, and Mark nodded in agreement again. "You can always call me to go get him if you can't make it on time. I'm not going to be in the middle of surgery, am I?" Zack said. He had already told Mark where he worked and that he was a glorified accountant not an architect. Mark had given him a sympathetic smile for having such an unsexy job.

Now Zack moved on to less serious matters. He pointed out a paper under a magnet on the fridge.

"There's our shopping list. Al is not allowed to write on it. You and I will probably both end up going food shopping. Just check what we normally buy. No sodas, no sugary drinks, no sugary anything, no junk food. If you have to have it for yourself, keep it out of Al's hands. Label it or something."

"I don't mind eating healthy. If I want junk food, I can grab something at a vending machine at the college."

Zack made a face at the thought of Mark eating out of a vending machine.

"I know, I am sucking all the fun out of that kid's life," Zack had to admit then he continued with his instructions.

They lingered in the kitchen some more, going over minor issues. Mark said he could cook on the days he didn't have classes. He had already agreed to do some chores like laundry and taking out the garbage.

"And the litter box?" Zack said sheepishly and cringed. But Mark agreed again.

"You are my hero. I'll deal with it in the evening since that's your time off," Zack promised. "Just keep it clean during the day."

They went back to the living room and Mark pointed to the TV.

"How much TV can Al watch?" Mark asked as if he had guessed that

Zack would be strict about that too.

"OK. I am a monster. But only half an hour. But that's in the evening anyway. You'll have most evenings off. Once you drop off Al at Little Rainbow, you are on your own time until next morning." Zack had already told him about Al spending his afternoons at Little Rainbow. Mark had agreed to schedule his classes in the late afternoons and evenings.

"And video games?" Mark asked though he looked like he knew what kind of answer to expect.

"No video games. If you want to play, try and make it look really boring and unpleasant," Zack said.

"Sure thing," Mark said while giving Zack an "Are you kidding me?" look.

"Make yourself at home anywhere except my bedroom and my office. Feel free to study or read whenever you get the chance during the day. Al doesn't need constant attention, He might want it, but he doesn't need it," Zack said to him. Then he asked, "Are you OK for money to pay for your classes? I can give you an advance if you need it."

Mark looked surprised at the offer. He smiled at Zack before he told him that Mia and Frank had given him a bonus that covered all the classes he was taking over the summer.

Zack took him through to the garage next and showed him his old Prelude.

"This car is yours to use. It's my old car from college. I just don't have the heart to get rid of it. It was my high school graduation gift from my dad. But it's perfect now because you can drive it. And I mean you can use it for whatever you need not just to drive Al."

"Are you sure?" Mark asked probably worried about the car's sentimental value.

"I'd rather have you drive it than have it sitting in the garage," Zack told him. He liked the idea of Mark driving this good old car, sentimental value and all.

"I'll take good care of it," Mark vowed. "And I'll pay for gas if I use it for my own stuff."

"No. Gas is on me. Just keep it reasonable. And let me know if any repairs come up, obviously. I'll be paying for those too."

"Thank you," Mark said and looked at the car appreciatively.

"No problem. Think of it as the company car."

After that Mark said he was expected at Mia's for dinner and he left. It was decided that on Sunday, he would be moving in.

As Zack pictured Mark driving his old Prelude, he thought back to all the times he had fooled around in that car. He did his best to separate the two images, but it wasn't easy. But all the sweaty action that car had seen wasn't the reason he kept it all these years. The reason he couldn't give it up was because he remembered too well his father handing him a gift box with the keys in it. That was right before he went off to college. It was one of the last times he got to hug his dad.

Zack was surprised that he was so comfortable with the idea of a stranger driving that car. Of course if he was willing to let Mark take care of Al, the least he should trust him with was an old car full of memories.

Chapter 5

"PJ is awake! I'm awake! Why are you sleeping?" Al yelled, waking Zack.

"Because I'm not a kid or a cat," Zack grumbled and pulled the covers up as he curled away from the voice that now said "Daaaaad!"

That voice was worse than any alarm clock. And worse yet, there was no turning it off as it intruded into Zack's sleep way too early in the morning. He turned away from it, but that didn't stop Al. He climbed on the bed and draped himself over Zack's shoulder. Zack refused to open his eyes. A small boy's weight was negligible. He could sleep through that.

"PJ is awake even, and she sleeps all the time!" he yelled again, this time right into Zack's ear.

"Al, go away," he mumbled. Maybe if he didn't move his mouth too much, he wouldn't really wake up. It would be like talking in his sleep.

"PJ needs to go out," Al said, pulling on Zack's ear.

"We talked about this. Cats don't need to go out. She has a litter box for that." Zack buried his face in the pillow in frustration.

"She wants to go in the back yard. She's scratching at the glass door, and I'm not allowed to open it." All was now poking Zack in the back with his finger.

"Good. Don't open it." At least Al wasn't breaking any rules for that damn cat.

"There's a bird."

"What? A bird? Al, go play with PJ and the bird or whatever," Zack said trying to get rid of the little pest and go back to sleep.

"I can! I can go in the back yard by myself, just me and PJ?" Al sounded excited as he jumped off Zack's bed. In turn, Zack jumped awake.

"No. What?"

"The bird is in the back yard. I can go play with it and PJ?" Al said annoyed that Zack was so slow to understand.

"No, no." Zack hung his head as Al frowned in confusion and disappointment. Birds were always taunting PJ. They would come flying down to peck at worms and bugs in the lawn while PJ pawed at the glass, trapped inside. And PJ was an excitable cat just as Al was an excitable kid. Either one would have been too much for Zack to handle. Together they were a nightmare.

"Al, what day is it?" Zack asked. He wanted to remind Al that it was Sunday and that he was supposed to let him sleep late.

Instead, Al reminded him of something else, "It's Sunday, and we're going to see the Jumping Dogs." With those terrible words, Al ran out of the room yelling happily about the Jumping Dogs.

"Oh, God. No," Zack groaned. Now he wished even more that he wasn't awake.

Al had been told by one of the kids at Little Rainbow about a special show at the fair. There would be all kinds of performers, acrobats, jugglers, clowns and the Jumping Dogs of course. The last attraction got Al's attention, and he pestered Zack until he agreed to take him. Now Zack was committed to this outing instead of getting to lie around the house in his robe all Sunday until it was time to go get Mark. Zack would have to thank whichever inconsiderate child had told Al about the show and whichever inconsiderate parent had taught that child to speak.

Al had been calling Zack repeatedly in a weird reversal of their usual roles in the morning.

"I'm coming," Zack mumbled petulantly, sounding a little too much like a pouting child for his own liking. First he checked his phone for any messages, and answered one or two. He finally noticed that Al was giving him an exasperated look.

"It's ten after twelve," Al yelled.

"I know how to read a clock. I'm the one who taught you," Zack reminded him.

"Hurry up. We'll miss it."

"Can't have that," Zack said to himself.

"We'll be late," Al said.

The show started exactly at 1:00, and Zack had made the mistake of teaching Al how to tell time.

"You're too bossy for such a short guy." He put his hand on top of Al's head and wondered if he needed to make a new mark on the height chart in the hall. Seeing Al open his mouth, Zack warned him. "And don't say you are a kid. That's no excuse."

"Let's go!" Al said instead.

"You want to drive? Or maybe you want to walk? If I'm driving, I need my keys." Zack went in search of them, and Al helped him by telling him to hurry up.

Car keys in hand Zack found Al waiting for him by the front door with his hand on the door knob. Zack recognized the impatient pose. For a second Kelly was standing there waiting for Zack or Zack's dad to drive her to the mall to meet her obnoxious friends.

"Dad!" Al yelled to snap him out of it. Good boy.

Zack let Al run past him to the car in the driveway, where he would only have to wait impatiently for Zack to unlock the door for him. He hoped to teach him the lesson that sometimes rushing doesn't pay off.

"You're too slow," Al complained as he climbed in and buckled himself into the car seat even before Zack was done closing the back door.

"Let's go see those dancing dogs."

"Jumping Dogs," Al corrected him.

Al wasn't wrong to rush them. It was a mob scene. They just barely managed to find a parking spot in time for the start of the performance. The place was packed with put upon parents and screeching kids. Like Al, they were all there for the Jumping Dogs. As far as Al was concerned, all the other acts were just filler. It was all about the Jumping Dogs. He started screaming as soon as they scampered onto the stage and didn't stop until they scurried away

behind the curtain. There were six small, brown dogs of the same breed. The woman who guided them through their performance spoke to them in some Eastern European language. They jumped through various contraptions, none of them on fire, thank God. They had several synchronized routines that were very much like dancing. So Al had to squeal, "They're dancing!" The dogs did some amazing tricks, and they were damn adorable. Zack was just relieved that there was no pet store anywhere nearby, or he would have had another mouth to feed by the time they got home. Al was predictably overexcited, breathless and chattering non stop on the way to the car. On the ride home, he was telling Zack all about what he had seen even though he had been sitting right next to him watching the same performance only minutes ago. Al was also determined to tell PJ all about it and teach her some of those same tricks. Good luck with that.

Zack hardly had time to try and relax while Al drove PJ crazy. He was trying to teach her to hop on one leg and other impossible things. Fearing the worst, Zack was supervising the training. Then it was time to bring another guy into this circus.

"Let's go pick up Mark and Mark's stuff." Zack told Al.

"Can PJ come?"

Zack considered that he was doing PJ a favor leaving her behind and giving her a break from Al.

"What did I just say? There'll be three of us in the car plus Mark's stuff. There's no room for PJ."

"Yes, there is. PJ is small," Al insisted.

"Shush. No PJ."

When they arrived at Mia's, Mark was just bringing down his stuff from upstairs. He set everything by the door as he got ready to leave.

"Let me grab something." Zack reached for a bag though Mark protested. Zack wanted to take the stuff and let the Prestons have a minute with Mark, especially Dorie who was staring at him like she didn't want him to go.

"I can carry something too," Al volunteered as well then reached for a box full of books.

When Mark tried to keep him from trying to lift it, Zack stopped him.

"What's the matter? Lift it already. We don't have all day," Zack taunted Al. He heard Mia say something about him being mean.

"It's heavy," Al complained and furrowed at Zack.

"I told you to eat..."

"Ahh! Don't say broccoli!" Al said then reached for a smaller item to carry. Now Mark did stop him since Al was reaching for his laptop.

"Al. Never touch Mark's laptop," Zack warned him.

"Aww!" Al whined.

"You can help me carry this one," Zack offered. Al held onto one side of the bag without actually carrying one ounce of it.

As Zack loaded the car, Mia hugged Mark about a million times and cried. Frank was a little teary eyed too. Dorie held up well though at the last minute she didn't want to let go of Mark's hand. And this wasn't even their final goodbye before leaving for Spain. It made Zack feel almost guilty for taking Mark away, but it also made him glad to see that they cared so much about him.

As Mark sat in the passenger seat, once again Zack noticed how good he looked. His eyes just wanted to stay glued to Mark's face and body. At least driving would force him to keep his eyes on the road. But even as he looked straight ahead, Zack was very aware of Mark's physical presence next to him. Mark was especially hard to ignore when he leaned over to turn and talk to Al in the back seat.

As they headed home, Zack noticed that Mark seemed a little down. He tried his best to be attentive to Al as he was telling him all about the Jumping Dogs, but leaving the Prestons must have been hard for him.

"We can stop somewhere to eat, if you don't mind, Mark," Zack said.

Before Mark could answer, Al was putting in his vote by yelling, "Pizza!"

Maybe he wasn't in the mood for eating out, but not wanting to go against Al, Mark agreed.

They were seated quickly at their favorite little Italian place. The booths had green dividers, red seats and white tables. Al had insisted that Mark sit next to him, which put them both across from Zack.

"So you're allowed to have pizza?" Mark asked Al. He tried to look innocent, but he did give Zack a quick, accusing glance. He probably didn't think Zack let him have anything good.

"I indulge him a little when we eat out," Zack said while giving Mark an "I know what you think of me" look.

Al explained the pizza rule to Mark.

"I can have pizza, but it has to have a vegetable on it. And cheese is not a vegetable," Al said.

Mark was probably wondering why it even needed to be said that cheese was not a vegetable. Since he looked at Zack like he was somehow guilty in this, he had to defend himself.

"Don't look at me. Al tried to convince me that cheese was a vegetable."

"How?" Mark asked.

"Because it's not a meat," Al explained the reasoning for himself. He also poured over the menu, studying it carefully while pretending to read.

"Al, they didn't invent any new vegetables," Zack told him.

"I'm still looking." What he was doing was running his finger along the menu items like he was reading them.

"Jut pick green peppers like you always do," Zack said.

Al leaned toward Mark.

"Dad likes veggies," Al whispered to him like he was telling some shameful secret.

"Are you guys ready?" the waiter asked.

"Yes!" Al answered for all of them. Then he tried to put in an order. "We want the big pizza! The biggest one," Al told the waiter.

The waiter, who had seen Al in action before, smiled indulgently.

"You can disregard him. He has no money," Zack told the waiter. He let Mark order first.

"I'll have a slice with pepperoni." And that was it, his whole order.

Zack gave him a look then went on to order for himself and Al.

"We'll have one small with green peppers. Another small veggie lovers, hold the onions. And a small meat lovers."

Mark narrowed his eyes at Zack after the waiter left.

"That's three pizzas," Mark said.

"Oh, you can count. I am so glad I hired you," Zack mocked him a little.

"I can count too," Al put in.

Mark smiled at him before he went back to questioning Zack.

"You and Al are going to eat all that?" Mark said still trying to make him admit what was really going on.

"We always take the leftovers home. We'll have them tomorrow for dinner. With a nice, big salad, of course," Zack said like he had nothing to hide.

"Did you order one of those pizzas for me?" Mark finally stated the obvious.

"Yes, Mark. Because you just ordered a single slice."

"Maybe that's all I want." Mark was barely even trying to be convincing.

"I know you're probably not comfortable ordering a lot on my dime."

"I can pay..." Mark started to say.

"Dinner is on me. Any time we eat out, it's on me. And I won't be comfortable ordering what I want if you don't order what you want," Zack explained.

"Are you two fighting?" Al asked.

"Mark is giving me a hard time," Zack complained to Al.

"When we fight, Miss Suzie always makes us shake hands so we'll know the fight is over," Al told them wisely.

Zack put his hand out. Mark shook it and laughed.

"I feel very gentlemanly. Thank you, Al," Zack said.

"You're welcome," Al said as he rearranged his silverware.

Zack busied himself with his phone. It was just a hand shake. No big deal. But Zack felt like he needed to catch his breath. The touch of Mark's hand had reached right through him going straight to his groin. He hoped Mark didn't notice anything.

Mark kept his hand on the edge of the table as he looked out the window of the restaurant. It was starting to get dark. Al was talking about those performing dogs again. Mark looked at his hand. He didn't know a casual touch could spread from the palm of his hand and through his whole body. He had trouble swallowing and drank a sip of water. How was this going to work? How could he live in the same house with someone he was so hopelessly attracted to?

Zack carried the takeout boxes with all the leftover pizza while Mark carried in some of his stuff. Al made sure PJ didn't get out. Then he ran ahead to the room Zack had already offered Mark for his bedroom.

"PJ likes to sleep on this bed so it must be a good one," Al said as he stretched out on the bed himself.

"We changed the sheets," Zack reassured Mark.

"I helped make the bed," Al claimed.

Then seeing that in addition to taking credit for very little work, Al was making himself comfortable on Mark's bed, Zack reminded him about the new rule.

"Al. You remember what I told you about Mark's room."

"I know. Off limits!" Al said as he sat up and climbed off the bed.

"That's right."

For a second, Mark looked like he might disagree just to be nice but

then he smiled. Zack wanted to give him as much space as he could, and make Al leave him alone too, which was he bigger challenge.

Zack was still going to be putting Al to bed, but Mark got to observe their bedtime routine. As they waited for Al to finish up his nightly consultation with PJ, Mark noticed the book Zack was going to be reading. He opened it up.

"Ha!" Mark said on seeing the first illustration in the book. He then shook his head over the coincidence. But soon he was reading and shaking his head in a different way.

"You read this to him?" Mark was a little appalled.

"He asked for it," Zack said.

"I guess you are working your way up to Stephen King."

"The Shining is next on his reading list. I also use it as a teaching tool," Zack said pointing at the book in Mark's hand.

"To teach him what? Not to get eaten by a rhinoceros?"

"Not to talk to strangers even if they try to give him a bag of glowing alligator tongues."

"That is an important lesson," Mark said with a straight face.

Mark was going to leave them alone, but Al asked him to stay and listen to the story. Mark took a seat on the floor next to the door to keep out of the way. Zack felt a little self conscious reading in front of him. Mark wasn't paying attention to him though. He seemed lost in the story. But even when Al was asleep and Zack stopped reading, Mark still stared off into space. Zack went up to him, and Mark suddenly shook himself out of his mood and stood up.

Neither one of them said anything. Zack could guess that Mark was thinking about his childhood, being tucked into bed by his parents maybe. Before he went to his room to unpack, Mark gave him a sad smile acknowledging what Zack already knew.

Zack retreated to his office and tried to do some work. With Mark just a few feet away, he couldn't stay focused. Again he felt that physical awareness of Mark's presence. And he wasn't aware of him as a

stranger in the house, but as a hot, young male body within reach. Sometimes he could hear Mark moving around, and he would listen to those sounds with some undefined hope. Maybe he wanted Mark to walk in and invite him to share his bed. He could imagine that Mark would be warm, his body hard but giving. He could imagine them making love slowly because they had all the time in the world. They lived together now. Zack stifled a groan. How the hell was he going to get any sleep with Mark right down the hall?

Mark looked around his room. A typical guest room, it had little personality. But as he looked around trying to put his finger on it, he realized that the room gave off the impression of being only a temporary place to stay. No one lived here. Mark should be at ease in a room like that. Every place was temporary. This room was just more honest about it. Mark noticed that the blinds had been lifted. He looked outside. The window was on the side of the house and looked out at some shrubbery and then the tall hedge shared with the neighbors. At least the view would be green if not expansive. The best thing was still that there was a guest bathroom right there.

Mark was lying in a strange bed, staring up at an unfamiliar ceiling. The feeling of loneliness from before was gone. Mark felt an incredible tension and not just because he was hard and in need of release. He wanted Zack to come into his room, lock the door behind him, take off his clothes and climb into bed with him. He wanted him to do it without a question, as if they had already agreed to share their bodies and their lives. He imagined them as two grooms on their wedding night taking each other, belonging to each other.

To be decent in case he needed to get up, Mark slept in shorts and a t-shirt. There was nothing decent about him at the moment. He was a hard, pulsing well of unfulfilled need. He pushed off the cover and pushed down his shorts. His cock jutted forward from the dark hair it sprang from. As he looked at his erection, Mark wanted Zack to walk in so he could offer it to him. Instead, Mark gripped the shaft and bit his lip so he wouldn't cry out. Zack was watching him, touching him, sucking him. Mark came more quickly than he expected and then imagined Zack kissing him, carrying the taste of Mark's come in his mouth.

Mark couldn't remember if he had ever exhausted himself from coming so hard while masturbating. He felt that Zack had done that to him. He felt like Zack's body had really shared his bed, had warmed him and worked him to exhaustion so he could sleep.

Chapter 6

Waking up from restful sleep, Mark wondered if every night in this house would be like that, with a phantom Zack in his bed. The bright light of morning coming through the window dispelled some of the fantasies of the night before. To get rid of any lingering thoughts, Mark got up and took a quick shower which included some furious stroking.

Zack said that Mark didn't have to get up as early as he and Al did. Zack would still get him ready and take Al to kindergarten. Later on, when the summer break started, Mark would need to be awake by the time Zack went off to work, but not before. Mark decided that sleeping in would make a bad impression. He wasn't used to it anyway. At the Prestons' he had always gotten up early and made coffee. Mia and Frank had been so grateful to see coffee already brewed by the time they got up. They would shuffle into the kitchen like zombies and blindly reach for their cups while their eyes were still half closed. He also made better coffee than either of them. Dorie usually got up early too, like a lot of kids. She liked to help him with things.

As Mark stood in this new, unfamiliar kitchen without her there to count out the scoops of coffee, he knew he would miss her. She had started out counting as he scooped the coffee into the filter. Then as she got older, she did the scooping herself. Lately she had even been asking for her own cup of coffee. She had grown up so much, but she still wasn't allowed to drink coffee. As he was lost in thought, thinking about another kid, Mark noticed Al standing next to him in pajamas and bare feet.

"Want to help?" Mark asked him.

"I'm helping PJ," Al said while looking up at him and helping no one.

"PJ must be very busy," Mark said.

Al nodded.

"Do you know how your dad likes his coffee?" Mark asked though he didn't expect Al to know something like that.

"In there," Al said and pointed at a kitchen cabinet door. Mark opened it and found glasses and coffee cups.

"That one. No, the other that one," Al said as Mark reached for some cups. He got a yellow coffee mug with the word Dad on it for Zack. That was probably the only useful information Al was likely to have on the subject of coffee. Mark decided to stick to a medium strength brew and let Zack tell him how he liked it.

"Which one can I use?" Mark asked Al. The cups were all different, not a set.

Al became thoughtful as he considered the various options. Then there was a decision followed by "that one, not that one", until Mark was holding a Christmas themed mug decorated with a goofy looking, possibly tipsy Santa Claus.

"Which one is yours?" Mark asked him.

"I can't drink coffee! I'm a kid," Al told him indignantly.

"Can you drive a car?" Mark asked him.

"Noo!" Al now looked at him incredulously and shook his head at his ignorance.

"How am I going to get to work then?" Zack asked as he came into the kitchen, already dressed for work.

"You are gonna drive!" Al told him.

"That's probably best until you can reach the pedals and see over the steering wheel," Zack told him.

Exasperated at the both of them, Al left the kitchen with another shake of his head.

"Gotta keep him on his toes," Zack said as he got out a cereal bowl. Then seeing that Mark had already made coffee he told him, "You didn't need to make coffee unless you're just making it for yourself."

"I was up anyway. Let me know if it's how you like it."

Zack poured himself some and only added some skim milk.

"I can take it a little stronger, but this is fine too," he told Mark.

Mark tried not to stare, but he checked out Zack a little bit. He wore a pale blue shirt with a dark gray tie and gray slacks. He had hung up a matching suit jacket over the back of a chair. He wore those colors really well. Though the clothes suited his coloring, he would have looked good in anything. Mark once again found himself admiring his physique. Naturally strong, not overdeveloped, it was not the kind of body that usually posed for the camera. It was real. It was the kind of body that pulled you close. Mark realized that he was just standing there, holding his Christmas coffee mug like an idiot. Feeling that he might get in the way of Zack's morning routine, he was about to leave.

"You want cereal? I usually have toast. I can put in some extra slices. Check out this monster," Zack said as he showed him a fancy, four slice toaster. Seeing Mark's raised eyebrows, he said, "It was a gift. I never make more than one slice at a time. I need a one slice toaster not this."

Mark added some extra slices of whole grain bread to put the toaster's capabilities to better use.

"Now we're living," Zack said as he pressed down the lever.

Mark offered to go get Al since he didn't show up when Zack called him to come eat his cereal.

"No. Don't chase him. Make him come to you. Threaten him with vegetables. That always works."

Then Zack demonstrated his technique.

"Al! I was just showing Mark where we keep the broccoli!"

"Why?" Al said as he rushed in and looked around the kitchen suspiciously.

"So he would know where we keep it. You want him to cook you some right now?" Zack even reached as if to open the refrigerator.

"No," Al said and went to sit in front of the cereal bowl

"Then eat your cereal."

Al glared at Zack and a little bit at Mark too. He obviously suspected that a conspiracy was forming against him. Since Zack ate standing up and worked on his laptop a little, Mark went to sit with Al.

"What's your plan for today?" Mark asked him.

"I'm going to kindergarten. Then I'm going to Little Rainbow."

"I'm going to do some stuff too," Mark told him.

Al nodded. Mark noticed that he ate with a big spoon.

"How come you have that big spoon? You want a smaller one?" Mark wondered if maybe there weren't any small, clean ones left.

"No, I like this kind."

"How come?"

"It's faster," Al explained.

Mark looked at Zack who shrugged like his own kid was a mystery to him too.

Standing at the front door, Mark held PJ and waved to Zack and Al as they drove away. After he closed the door and let PJ scamper away, Mark went into the kitchen and poured himself what was left of the coffee. He looked at the Christmas coffee mug. His coffee mug now. His mug at the Prestons' was a Superman one that Dorie had given him as a birthday gift. It was still packed somewhere among his things. He would show it to Al and see if he could get his permission to use it. Dorie had been a bossy kid too but in a different way. Catching himself at it, Mark resolved not to compare the two kids. He would probably get just as attached to Al soon enough.

To start making himself useful, Mark checked to see if any laundry needed to be done. He went through Zack's bedroom and resisted the urge to go to his bed and wallow in it. But soon enough he found himself staring at the hamper in Zack's bathroom. Zack had thrown a t-shirt and sweatpants on top of it. Mark wondered if that's what he had slept in. He told himself not to, but he was already kneeling on the bathroom floor. Pulling Zack's clothes to him, he buried his face in them. He felt almost dizzy with lust and he gasped. He started taking his own clothes off then he stopped himself. Mark wanted to feel Zack's clothes against his own skin. Instead he just held them in his hands. They were soft, wrinkled from being slept in, and maybe still the slightest bit warm from Zack's body. Mark breathed hard. He knew that if he couldn't get his desire under control, this would never work,

and he would have to leave. Standing up, he held the clothes against his face gently then added them to the others he was going to wash.

He was busy for a while, but then thought about Zack and Al coming home at the end of the day. Mark found that he looked forward to seeing both of them, though in very different ways.

Zack didn't expect everything to change like this because of Mark, especially not at work. His whole workday was spent in anticipation of going home and seeing Mark again. He usually only looked forward to seeing Al at the end of the day. He found that he had to remind himself that Mark had the evenings off, and he might not be there. That thought brought him to a state of crushing disappointment. But maybe Mark would be home. Because of that he constantly checked the time, and he did that too much even before Mark came along.

Zack had developed an obsession with punctuality when he was a kid. It faded as he got older, but ever since Al came into his life, Zack had a new awareness of time that centered on his son. It wasn't about making a good impression, keeping appointments and being on time for meetings any more. Now it was about being on time to pick up Al. Of course he wanted to be considerate to babysitters and the people at Little Rainbow. But it was really about trust. He didn't want Al to ever doubt him. He was determined to never give Al that moment of fear when a parent doesn't come to pick him up. That terrible waiting was burned into Zack's mind.

Zack's mother was a lot like Zack, always on time, or if not on time, then early. When Zack stepped out in front of his school and she wasn't there, it was the first time that had ever happened. And it wasn't a wait of a few minutes. The waiting went on and on.

Zack didn't remember who finally came to pick him up from school because the news that came after obliterated the ride home from his memory. There were too many people at the house, and Zack couldn't find his father or mother. Then his father was there, but he looked different. Then came the terrible thing his father had to tell him.

No one who came to pick him up from school after that was as punctual as his mother. His grandmother was not well even then. Her daughter's death only worsened her heart condition. She did the best she could for Zack. His father did his best too, but he had a job that took up a lot of his time. Babysitters came and went, punctual or not according to their character and circumstances. His stepmother was

hardly ever on time. Once she was almost an hour late because the car broke down. Though Zack often had to wait and wait, that first endless wait could never be repeated. He knew that no matter how long he stood, watching for her red car, his mother would never again come and pick him up.

Zack looked at the clock almost obsessively when he was on his way to pick up Al but especially if there was any kind of delay on the road or even a hint of one. Today the drive was nice, and he pulled up in front of Little Rainbow right on time.

"Did you have a good day?" Zack asked Al as he made sure he was buckled properly.

Al thought about it. "Yes," he concluded after some deep thought.

Zack smiled at him. He wondered how much their lives were going to change because of Mark. Already Zack was thinking too much about him. He found that he had to subdue a feeling of excitement and anticipation as he drove home.

In his distraction, he almost missed what Al was saying in the back seat.

"Upchuck, upchuck," Al was repeating to himself.

"What are you saying over there?" Zack asked him.

"Millie upchucked. Ha ha."

"What do you mean, ha ha? Would you think it was funny if it was you?"

"Yes," Al said without hesitation, and Zack saw him nod emphatically in the rear view mirror.

"And what's this upchuck business? In this family we say barf," Zack corrected him.

"Barf. Barf. Upchuck, upchuck, upchuck." Al tried them both out, but he still seemed to like upchuck better.

As soon as they walked in the house, Al started yelling for Mark. Zack wondered if he was going to tell him the upchuck story. When Mark

poked his head out of the kitchen to greet Al, Zack couldn't help but smile. Then Mark smiled at him too, and they were just two grinning fools staring at each other.

They heated up the pizza from the night before and added salad for that night's dinner.

"How was your day, young man?" Mark asked Al after they started eating.

"I got in trouble," Al announced though he didn't seem to be upset about it. He had also forgotten to mention anything about it to Zack until now. Typically there was a trickle of information from Al about his day. And the more important the information, the later Zack would find out about it.

"What did you do?" Zack asked knowing that it couldn't be too bad, or he would have gotten a phone call about it.

"Brooke got me in trouble. But she was the one who was saying stupid stuff. Brooke said that you aren't allowed to adopt me because you'll teach me bad things. That's what her mom told her," Al said.

"Did you tell this little girl that she was misinformed?" Zack asked dryly.

"No. I told her she was stupid and ugly and that her mom was stupid and ugly too."

"So you paraphrased," Zack said confusing Al.

"What?"

"And did Miss Avril talk to you about it?" Zack asked.

"Aha. She said not to listen to anything Brooke said. And she said not to call other kids names. And she told Brooke that she shouldn't say mean things about other kid's parents if she doesn't want other kids to call her mom ugly and stupid and fat. But I didn't say fat."

"Good for you," Zack said while covering his mouth with his hand so Al wouldn't see him smirking. Mark did smirk a little.

"Do I have to write a sorry?" Al asked.

"No," Zack and Mark answered in unison. Mark looked like he thought he shouldn't have said it but also like he wasn't sorry. It proved that

they were in agreement as they looked at each other and smiled wickedly.

Who knows how long they would have been doing that if Al hadn't knocked over his juice glass.

"I'll get paper towels," Mark said and got up.

"No. You're off duty, remember," Zack said as he tried to wipe up the spill with napkins.

"I can still help," Mark insisted. They moved the plates and cleaned up with Al looking worried.

"Now you do have to write a sorry. Just a small one," his father told him.

Al wrote the sorry and drew a tipped over glass on the back of it, not that they could tell, but he told them what it was.

Chapter 7

Mark spent the rest of the week getting used to things. Mostly he had to get used to his feelings for Zack. After the first rush of uncontrollable lust, Mark calmed down a little and learned to deal with thing better. It still wasn’t easy to be close to someone he wanted so much but couldn't make a move on. Zack made it both harder and easier on him by making Mark like him in other ways. By being easygoing and casual, Zack pulled Mark in. And the more Mark liked Zack, the less he wanted to do anything that would force him to leave. Maybe he couldn't have Zack, but at least he could be close to him and Al too. As for how Zack felt about him, Mark was almost sure that the attraction was mutual. But he also knew that Al was the most important thing to Zack, and he wouldn't do anything that would confuse him or complicate his life.

On Sunday morning, Mark came into the living room to find Zack with a coffee cup, reading the paper while Al was hanging over his shoulder. When Zack tried to turn the page, Al stopped him.

"I'm not done," Al said. Seeing Mark, he called out to him, "Come and help us read the newspaper."

"Yes. Al is already helping me so I can use all the help I can get," Zack said.

Mark took that as a hint that Zack wanted to be rescued.

"Al, you want to help me with breakfast?" Mark asked. He had a choice of Sunday or Saturday off. That week he had taken Saturday off. But since Zack was home, there really wasn’t much for him to do on Sunday either.

"Relax. You don't need to worry about breakfast," Zack said. "I'll deal with it. I just got sidetracked."

"I wanted to make something," Mark said. "Pancakes maybe."

"Yes! Make the big pancakes!" Al said making a circle with his arms to show him how big.

"I made the mistake of making him a giant pancake once," Zack lamented. Then he said to Al, "No giant pancakes. The giant pancakes are only for special occasions."

"Aww."

"You want to help me make some normal pancakes?" Mark asked Al.

"Are you sure you don't want to just relax?" Zack asked him.

"I'd like to do it if it's OK," Mark said. He felt like as long as he was on the clock, he should make it count.

"Sure, but don't feel you have to. We're not used to special Sunday breakfasts. You don't want to spoil us," Zack said.

But Al was already running into the kitchen yelling, "Pancakes, pancakes, pancakes!"

Though Mark thought Zack wanted to be left alone to read his Sunday paper in peace, Zack soon brought his coffee and his paper and came to join them in the kitchen.

"Dad! He's doing it wrong," Al tattled on Mark.

"He's not doing it wrong. He's just doing it his way," Zack told him. He was just taking a seat at the kitchen table and not taking Al seriously.

"He'll ruin them," Al complained.

"Have a little faith," Zack admonished him. Then he added his usual threat, "And you know you can always have broccoli."

"Broccoli, broccoli, broccoli. Stop it with the broccoli all the time!" Al lamented.

Zack looked over at Mark who was laughing over the bowl of pancake batter he was mixing.

"He's smooshing bananas!" Al said with alarm.

"Sounds good," Zack told him without taking his eyes off the paper.

"No. There are no bananas in pancakes," Al was now telling Mark.

"There are bananas in banana pancakes," Mark told him patiently.

Al thought about that for a while.

"Will I like them?" Al asked with a look of serious concern.

"Do you like bananas?" Mark asked him.

"Yes."

"Then, yes, you will like them," Mark told him with complete confidence.

Still Al kept observing the whole cooking process with doubt and looking up at Mark for reassurance. When the pancakes were almost done, Al and Zack set the table. Then the banana pancakes were served. Zack put only a little butter and maple syrup on his pancakes. Al tried to drench his but was stopped after pouring only enough syrup to cover the top of one pancake. Al waited for his father to taste the pancakes first. Zack forked a big bite into his mouth.

"Hey. Good stuff," he said after swallowing. If he was saying that only for Al's benefit, he was a really good actor. Then he revealed his reason for liking them. "They hardly need any syrup. They're great. Even better than blueberry. Good job." Zack then put more of the pancakes in his mouth.

Mark wasn't sure how much Zack liked them and how much was a ploy to convince Al to like them. He was sure that Zack approved of them. Al never took his eyes off his dad as he ate. When he thought it was safe, Al tasted his pancakes more cautiously and with more syrup.

"I like them too," he pronounced without swallowing first.

"I'm glad," Mark said to him. He was happy to hear that from Al and from Zack. Maybe even too happy.

"Sure. You can make them any time," Al said.

"You wish," Zack told him. To Mark, he added," See. He's already spoiled."

But Al had more to say about his preferences.

"Just don't make anything with raisins. I don't like them."

"You like them, you just don't know it yet," Zack told him.

"No. I really don't like them. They're wrinkly," Al explained.

"So when I'm old and wrinkly, will you stop liking me?" Zack asked leaning over to make a wrinkly face at Al.

Al nodded solemnly his mouth full of pancakes.

"You're going to ditch your poor, old, wrinkly dad?" Zack pressed him. He even gave him a sad expression to try and guilt him.

"I won't ditch you," Al reassured him. "I just won't like you."

Zack looked over at Mark like he wanted sympathy. Mark gave him a shrug instead. In response, he got a blue eyed glower from Zack that tingled down his spine. He tried really hard not to think about licking pancake syrup right off his lips or licking him in general.

When Zack managed to think about Mark objectively and not with his dick, which was rarely, he had to admit that he was pleased. As Mark learned the ins and outs of their household, they did have some ups and downs though. All the downs so far were minor. Zack could only smile when he thought how well Mark fit in. He did his best not to read too much into it. But Zack's stupid brain would often jump to the conclusion that Mark belonged because he was meant to be one of them. He was made to be part of their family.

Mark was getting ready to go grocery shopping, and of course Al wanted in on that action.

"I want to go!"

"Is that OK?" Mark asked naively.

"OK? It's a nightmare. He'll ask you to buy him the whole store. He just grabs things off the shelves and tries to sneak them into the cart. And those displays by the cash registers were designed for grabby little hands like his," Zack warned him.

The whole time Al shook his head to deny the charges being leveled against him.

"So I can take him," Mark concluded from all that.

"You take Al with you at your own risk," Zack said to throw in a final warning.

Mark gave Zack a crafty look before he explained his reasoning.

"I have to take Al with me at least once to see if he can be good. Then if he doesn't behave, he'll never be allowed to come with me ever again," Mark said perfectly deadpan.

Zack had to laugh especially at Al's reaction to the news that he would have to be on his best behavior or else. It made sense though. Before Mark, Zack was stuck taking Al shopping with him. Now with Mark there, Al would only get to tag along with either of them if they let him.

Mark was just back from the store with a good report card for Al's behavior. As he was putting away groceries, he improvised weights from the milk jug and the orange juice carton. Zack caught him doing this when he came into the kitchen to help.

"I have weights you know. They are in the closet in my office. They might be a little dusty because I use them all the time of course."

"Thanks. Frank let me use his weights too," Mark said.

"I can tell," Zack said without thinking, and Mark gave him an amused look.

Zack didn't mean to make it so obvious that he had checked out Mark, though not as thoroughly as he would have liked.

"There is a mat and a bench in there too, just pull them out. Use what you need whenever you want," Zack told him.

"Even when you're in there working?" Mark teased him some more.

"Especially then." Zack teased back and stared at him as if to say "If you dare" But then Zack thought maybe he shouldn't have. And he definitely shouldn't think too much about Mark sweating, straining or otherwise exerting his beautiful body. And he definitely shouldn't think of Mark exercising in the nude.

It wasn't easy for Zack not to mentally undress Mark. He was hard to resist especially when Zack saw him using the little, hand-held vacuum to get the cat hair off the spot on the couch where PJ liked to perch. At times like those, it took all of Zack's willpower not to blurt out, "I love you". When Mark went under the cushions and vacuumed up the crumbs. Zack was almost in tears and on his knees, ready to

propose.

Later, Zack was sitting on that same spot with Al and PJ, both of them sleepy in his lap. Absently running his fingers through Al's hair, Zack looked up and saw Mark giving him a warm look. He did that sometimes when he caught him being sweet to Al. It embarrassed Zack a little, but clearly Mark appreciated that side of him.

He made Zack feel more secure, more like they were a household at full capacity. He worried less about Al since Mark came into their lives. Though Mark usually took Al's side against him, Zack still felt like he had an ally.

It had always worried him that he was a single parent with no living parents or siblings to fall back on. Though Mark was young, there was something steady and reassuring about him. It surprised Zack, but it also made him happy. Even if it wouldn't last, for now he had someone to lean on.

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Zack remembered talking to Kelly about how Al would have only him. She had been sure that Zack wouldn't be a single dad for long, that he would find a guy to share his life. Jokingly, Zack had asked her, "Aren't you worried about Al having a gay dad?"

"No. That's perfect actually. That way I'll always be his one and only mom," Kelly had answered.

At that moment, it hit them both that soon Al would really only have Zack. Kelly would be gone, and Zack would have to tell her son all about her so Al would know her and remember her. The enormity of it struck him as it would again and again in those days, and for weeks, and over the years. Zack didn't know yet the beauty of what he was gaining. He only saw the loss and the responsibility, and a need and a role he could never fulfill. How could he be a parent, a father? But Kelly had faith in him. She had supported Zack ever since she was a kid, in her own way.

Kelly had laughed at him when she found out he was gay. This was when Zack was in high school, and he had a crush on Joe Wyman. Kelly had caught Zack kissing his year book picture, the one where Joe posed with his first place running trophy held over his head. She had sneaked up on him, and seeing what he was doing she had

actually pointed and laughed. Zack could have strangled her. She even said she would tell everyone. Then she amended it.

"Not this Joe guy. He's a jock. He might kill you."

"Who then?" Zack challenged her.

She thought about it. It looked like she was going down a list of names and crossing them off.

"Not Mom or Dad. Or anyone at my school. Or anyone at your school. Or any of my friends," she said making her threat pretty much worthless.

"Who does that leave? Random people on the street?" Zack asked her.

"Yes."

But of course she didn't tell anyone. As little sisters go, she wasn't completely horrible. Unless Zack remembered the words "What a spaz" said in his direction many, many times. And he remembered Kelly telling him unequivocally, "You will never, ever, ever be cool." She had pronounced his sentence, and it was right on the money.

At that time, Zack couldn't imagine that in a few years he would lose her and then gain a son.

As Zack became a father so abruptly, he couldn't help worrying about some other father showing up to take Al away from him. Kelly reassured him about that.

"Al's father is just a guy I spent one night with. He couldn't find me or Al any more than I could find him. He was just a guy who let me sleep in this old car he stole. I had a setback right then. I got kicked out of this place where I was crashing. I was still hanging on to this job that barely kept me fed, but I was on the street for the night. That's when I met him. He was nice. He shared his burger and fries with me and a joint or two. And believe me I needed the joint, the food, and him. As nights in stolen cars go, that was a good one. He talked non stop, so watch out, this little dude might turn out to be a chatterbox." She tickled Al under the chin and he giggled.

"Are you sure Pillsbury Dough Boy isn't his father?" Zack asked seeing how he giggled and otherwise resembled him as all babies do.

"Let's check." Kelly tickled his tummy, and he giggled again.

"Open and shut case."

Chapter 8

The term was over and summer classes hadn't started yet. Mark had more time than he would once he started going to classes again and Al got out of kindergarten. Sari called him to invite him to lunch to celebrate her summer job and his new job too. Like a lot of Mark's friends, she was going to college full time the rest of the year. As Sari munched on appetizers, her usual choice instead of a meal from any menu, Mark thought about what Zack would say about the fried mozzarella sticks she was dipping in sauce. Of course Zack wouldn't agree with Mark's choice of a mountain of sweet potato fries either.

Mark had just told Sari that he liked both Zack and Al and that neither one of them was difficult so far.

"You got lucky then," she said and wiped some grease off her lip. Mark couldn't believe that she didn't weigh a million pounds. She was actually in great shape. In fact, she had a shape a lot of guys found irresistible. She was curvy but still slim, dark and sultry. Unfortunately, she only wanted guys who were too smart for their own good and didn't know what the hell to do with her. Her nerd fetish really worked against her. She went after guys who had hardly any experience, and then she was surprised that she had to train them. Of course, Zack was a little bit of a nerd. But Mark would bet anything that he would know exactly what to do. Seeing that his thoughts had strayed, Mark forced himself to focus on what Sari was saying.

"It's unbelievable that you are helping someone raise a kid." She shook her head as she said this.

"I did it before. For three years," he reminded her.

"I know. It was even more unbelievable then."

"It's a job like any other job," Mark lied.

Though she didn't call him on the lie, Sari did contradict him.

"It's nothing like any normal job."

"Well, it works for me. For now," he had to add. It was strange to become so involved with a family and then it's all over. Of course, that

was the story of his life. Why should he be surprised? But Mia and her family leaving for Spain was nothing like what happened with his own family. Mia had made sure he had some place to go, and she promised to keep in touch.

"Maybe you just like being part of a family," Sari threw in.

"Don't psychoanalyze me," Mark told her. "And I'm not part of the family. I'm the hired help."

"Yeah right. Mia practically adopted you."

"Mia was great. But it's not going to be like that this time," Mark said.

"I bet it isn't," Sari said with a wiggle of her eyebrows.

Mark looked at her in surprise. He had told her nothing about Zack being attractive or his own feelings, which were now barely under control. How did she see through him like that? As he finished up his sweet potato fries, Mark worried. If he was that transparent, maybe Zack could tell how much he wanted him. The question was what would he do about it.

Zack stayed at work later than usual, taking advantage of Mark's availability. Since Mark hadn't started his summer classes yet, he could pick up Al from Little Rainbow. When Zack got home only an hour later than usual, he was greeted by an awful smell. He went into the kitchen to find the source.

"Oh, God, what did you burn?" Though he asked, Zack recognized the smell of burned cheese.

"Lasagna. I'm sorry. I set it to broil by mistake. I'm really sorry," Mark said though he was still busy dealing with the disaster.

"Don't worry about it. Just make that smell go away," Zack told him.

"I'll open the windows. Sorry," Mark said sounding flustered.

"I'll open the ones in the living room so we can have a nice draft," Zack told him.

Al was running through the living room waving a magazine in the air, looked like maybe Popular Science. He was holding his nose while yelling "stinky".

"I see you're doing your part," Zack said to him.

Zack got cleaned up and changed then made his announcement to Mark and Al.

"Ok. Let's get out of here. I'll close the windows. You get Al to put on his shoes. We're eating out."

Al was cheering as Mark led him to get his shoes on. To make sure he knew he was included, Zack said to Mark, "That means you too."

"Oh, no. I..." Mark started to protest.

"You have to make sure Al eats his veggies," Zack told him.

"You said I had evenings off," Mark reminded him like he hadn't already picked up Al and made dinner, or tried to, on his supposed evening off. Zack reminded himself to make sure to pay him extra for that. But for now, he just wanted to make him feel better.

"Then you have to come with us as a punishment for stinking up the house," Zack told him. Knowing that Mark felt bad for ruining dinner, Zack pushed harder than he would have otherwise.

"Really? Dinner out is a punishment?" Mark said. He had a wry look on his face, like he always did when Zack was spouting some kind of nonsense.

"My reasons don't have to be convincing. I'll just sic Al on you," Zack threatened. But instead of carrying out his threat, he pleaded with Mark. "Come on. Otherwise I'll be stuck talking to this one the whole time." Zack indicated Al with a quick gesture which Al missed while tying his shoes. But he heard what he said, and he had to know who Zack was talking about.

"Who? Who's 'this one'?" Al asked.

"No one. You don't know him," Zack told him.

If Mark was honest, he had to admit that he wanted to impress Zack with his cooking. That's why he felt so bad that his dinner was a failure. And Zack was being so nice about it. Once again Mark was reminded that though Zack might complain about the little things that went wrong, he only cared that Mark took good care of Al.

"That's what you get for trying to cook evil food," Zack claimed during the drive to the restaurant.

"Lasagna?"

"Cheese and dough topped with more cheese."

"There is also a sauce."

"That's trapped under a mountain of cheese. Cook us a nice healthy soup or something," Zack suggested.

"Soup." Al made a face.

"I can never get minestrone right. Have a crack at it," Zack requested.

Mark gave him a put upon look.

"You don't have to," Zack relented right away.

"I'll see what I can do," Mark said grudgingly. He liked the idea of cooking something that Zack would love not just approve of. But he didn't like that he wanted to please Zack so badly and in a way that had nothing to do with doing his job well.

They had dinner at a noisy, family restaurant that served good beer according to Zack. Zack made sure Al saw him give his car keys to Mark and explained why. It seemed too early for that lesson, but better too early than too late. That's how Zack explained his reasoning when Mark teased him about it.

There were a number of families and couples in the restaurant. Mark wondered what the three of them looked like to all those other people. He could too easily see himself, Al, and Zack as a family. When he and Zack talked to each other, Al would look at them and try to follow their conversation. If they ignored him for too long, he would squirm. Zack was telling Mark about how the company where he and Mia worked got started and how he got involved. All of a sudden, Mark had a feeling that this might be like being on a first date with Zack. Good thing Al was interrupting them with questions to remind Mark that he and Zack weren't on a date. Plus, if Zack did take him out on a date, it would be to a nicer place than this.

As he drove them back home, Mark felt a warm glow inside him. It

was a nice night. When Mark commented on it as they got out of the car, Zack suggested they take a walk around the neighborhood before going inside. As they walked, Al sometimes held their hands sometimes circled around them or stopped to investigate something he saw. Zack kept telling him not to touch things and to keep his voice down as they went by people's houses. They passed a few people walking their dogs. Of course this was Al's cue to ask to have a dog of his own. Zack tried to tell him that a dog would eat PJ. Mark looked at him with disbelief. The strategy didn't work. Al didn't believe it. Zack grit his teeth so he wouldn't curse, and Mark laughed at him. Mark wondered if they could make the walk part of their routine, but he didn't dare mention it. He liked spending time with Zack and Al so much. It told him that he was getting pulled in too fast.

After a prolonged struggle, Al had gone to sleep a few hours before. The house was quiet. Mark was looking at photos that were hanging on the wall in the hallway, and Zack was looking at him. Everything told him that there was going to be trouble, from the way Zack couldn't stop staring at Mark to the way Mark looked back at him when he turned, and especially the way they smiled at each other stupidly and for no reason. To put an end to it, Zack went closer and told Mark about the last picture he had been looking at.

"That's Kelly and me when our parents got married. She's only a little older than Al in that picture," Zack told him. In the picture, Zack was wearing a suit, and Kelly was in a frilly, yellow dress.

"The resemblance is so clear," Mark said.

Zack saw it even more. The resemblance went beyond their looks. Al had Kelly's serious, dark eyes and her intensity and directness. And he didn't smile as much as Zack would have liked. He got that from her too.

"What you see around the house are almost all the pictures I have of Kelly," Zack said. He had never counted them. He didn't have the heart to. There were even fewer pictures of her with Al, only a handful. Most of the pictures of her were from when she was a kid. They were the ones Zack had kept after his father died. The ones of Al and Kelly were given to him by Kelly herself.

Zack remembered how she had gathered up all the pictures she had in one small, manila envelope. As she handed them to him, Kelly hesitated.

"What good is a dead mom?" she asked.

Zack took the pictures from her hand.

"You're not a dead mom. You're the one and only mom," he told her.

As he looked at the pictures, she said, "I wish I had better pictures to give you."

"I'll look for others so he can see what a cute and obnoxious little kid you were," Zack promised her. He had some of them but not enough.

"Find the one of me in the cat costume," she told him.

Zack remembered that picture. She had cat ears and a tail and painted on whiskers and nose. She looked adorable. That wasn't one of the pictures he had though.

"I will."

Zack had promised her then, but later he didn't dare follow through. Now he told Mark about it.

"I know Kelly's mom had a lot of pictures. I don't know what happened to them. Maybe some of her relatives have them now. But I couldn't risk getting in touch with them. I don't really think any court would take Al away from me. But even now, I can't help being afraid. I just couldn't risk it over some pictures. And Kelly wouldn't want me to. She wanted to guarantee Al's safety more than anything," Zack explained.

"Then you don't have anything to feel guilty about," Mark said bluntly.

Zack looked at him. He thought about why the pictures of Kelly were so important to him.

"I want to bring her back for Al. I want to keep her alive," he said.

Mark didn't say anything. There was nothing he could say to something like that. Mark just grabbed both his hands, squeezed them quickly and let go.

"When she ran away, I know I didn't try hard enough to find her." Zack hung his head. He didn't want to look at Kelly as a little kid right there on the wall next to him. She looked cute, but she wasn't smiling. Zack was holding her hand. In her other hand she had a small bouquet of white flowers.

"What more were you supposed to do?" Mark asked.

"I could have quit school and gone to look for her," Zack said. He had thought about it and never done it.

"Did you even know where to start looking?" Mark wanted to know.

"No," Zack had to admit.

"What are the chances that you could have found her when you didn't even know where to start looking for her?"

"Would you stop being rational." Zack looked at Mark as he said this. He didn't know what he wanted from him, but he kept talking to him anyway. "When she called me, I didn't push hard enough for her to tell me where she was or to accept my help."

"Would that work on her?" Mark asked, being rational again.

"Probably not. She was stubborn."

"I think you feel guilty because you have Al, and you don't think you deserve him," Mark said.

"I don't deserve him," Zack agreed.

"If you hated being a father, you wouldn't have this problem. Wait till he's a teenager, then you won't feel like you cheated and got a prize for it," Mark predicted.

For a minute, Zack only stared at him.

"Why did you have to say that? I'm in denial about this whole Al becoming a teenager thing." Zack shook his head. "Now you have no one to blame but yourself. I am never letting you leave. I am not dealing with a teenage Al without backup. You are staying with us forever. I will hear no objections or arguments."

Mark gave Zack one of those looks he reserved just for him.

"Sure thing, boss," he said.

"Cut it out."

"Yes, sir."

Now they were staring at each other again and smiling, standing close

in a dimly lit hallway. It was quiet and close to their bedrooms. Zack felt like his whole body pulsed, ready to climb into bed with Mark. As if he knew how close Zack was to giving into his feelings, Mark cleared his throat, said he was going to get some water, and walked away. Zack stood there for a minute not sure if he wanted to blame him or be grateful to him.

Chapter 9

With the start of the summer term, classes and studying were taking up much of Mark's time. That left him less time to obsess over Zack. He did the household chores more hurriedly now, but he still found time to sniff Zack's shirts and also to feel guilty about it. Zack smelled good though.

And with kindergarten finished for the summer, Al was loosed on the world. Zack had given Mark his condolences for having to deal with Al all day, but it wasn't so bad. Mark watched Al playing with a deck of cards and the cat. The game was mainly trying to give various cards to PJ after showing them to her. She pawed and sniffed at them.

"Get your nosy nose out of there, PJ. Those are my cards. Those are your cards," Al told her when she started nosing around the pile of playing cards Al had chosen for himself. He kept all the face cards.

Mark decided to teach him a card game and sneak in some math lessons at the same time. He imagined that Zack as an accountant would appreciate that. Whenever Mark thought of Zack, he felt a twinge. It was almost painful. Zack's mischievous, blue eyes, his smile, and his voice would flood back to him. Then the feeling was more than a twinge. His whole body would become suffused with a sweet pain, a deep ache only Zack could soothe.

Mark was still not back from that evening's class. Waiting for someone to come home was a new feeling for Zack. He wasn't used to it yet. As he tried to read some articles online, he found he was too preoccupied with Mark to concentrate. He put aside the reading and just sat on the couch. He tried to use Al to distract himself.

"Come sit with me," he said to Al, who was sitting on the living room floor and playing with a set of classic Legos, not the creativity destroying new kind. PJ was there too. She had picked out a green Lego piece to swat at.

"I'm sitting with PJ now," Al said without raising his eyes from what he was building.

"Is PJ more important than me?" Zack asked.

Al became thoughtful

"Hey, hey. Don't think about it. The answer is obvious. I'm your dad. That's a cat. I win automatically," Zack protested seeing that his importance versus a cat's required serious consideration. Plus he wasn't sure he would come out on top.

"Bring PJ, if you want," Zack compromised.

"But we're comfortable."

"Do you know how rejected I feel right now?" Zack said.

"What?" Al said with puzzlement and no sympathy.

Zack grumbled loudly and stretched himself out into a sprawl.

"You settle down over there," Al admonished him. He was probably repeating a phrase he must have heard a million times at school and Little Rainbow and maybe at home.

"Am I disturbing you?" Zack asked.

"What am I chopped liver?" Al said making Zack wonder if he heard him right.

"What do you think that means?" he asked Al.

"I know what it means," Al said defensively.

All this nonsense just so Zack wouldn't have to face what he was really feeling. He couldn't believe how much he missed Mark. But he just couldn’t focus on anything until Mark was back. Zack sneaked over to Al and loomed over him and the cat until he was noticed.

"You can sit there," Al said with a sigh and pointed at a spot on the carpet not occupied by the cat. The cat meowed as if in agreement, but probably because she wanted Zack to pet her.

When Zack tried to take some Legos for himself, Al said he needed them.

"When Mark comes home, he’ll play with me," Zack said. He tried not to dwell on the more adult implications of his words.

"No, he won’t. Mark likes me better than you," Al contradicted him.

"He does not."

"He does. I'm the favorite," Al said.

"No. I'm the favorite."

"No, I am!" then seeing that Mark was finally walking through the door, Al ran over to him and appealed to him. "Dad thinks he's the favorite."

"The favorite what?" Mark asked. He got a look in his eye like he was trying to hide his real reaction to what Al said.

"Your favorite," Al said.

"My favorite what?" Mark kept toying with him.

"What?" Al echoed in confusion.

Zack decided to get involved.

"His favorite flower? His favorite flavor of ice cream? His favorite cartoon? His favorite cat?" Zack said hoping to confuse Al more. It didn't work.

"Favorite guy," Al piped up. "Who's the favorite guy?"

Mark gave the question some thought. Then he came out with a name.

"Paulie Armento."

"Who? Who?" Al asked first of Mark then of Zack, who shrugged. "Who's that? Is it a kid? Dad!" Al was turning from Mark to Zack trying to get some answers.

"What? Why are you bothering me? I'm out of the competition," Zack said to him.

"Mark has another kid!" Al said with alarm. "He can't have another kid. I'm his kid."

"You're my kid. Doesn't that count for anything?" Zack asked him.

"No," Al answered without hesitation.

"At least think about it before you answer," Zack whined.

"Paulie isn't a kid. He's an old guy," Mark explained.

"Like Dad?" Al asked, and Zack glared. Mark smirked. Al was oblivious to the damage to Zack's ego he had done.

"I'm twenty nine," Zack grumbled.

"Really?" Mark asked.

"You better be saying that you thought I was younger," Zack warned him.

Instead of saying anything about that, Mark turned to Al.

"Paulie is a little older than your dad. He's almost seventy."

"Just a smidgeon older," Zack threw in.

"What's so great about him?" Al asked even more jealous now that his competition was someone other than his old dad.

"He's in my class at college, and he has great stories," Mark told him. It didn't make Al feel better.

"I have stories," he claimed.

"Yes, but they're all about PJ, and birds, and what the kids at Little Rainbow are mouthing off about," Zack told him.

"I have good stories!" Al insisted.

"Al, your stories are very nice. But Paulie is a lot older so he has a lot more stories. That's all. When you get older..."

"Broccoli!" Al exclaimed as a shorthand for what was keeping him from getting to be a grown up.

"Basically, yes." Mark had to admit with a shake of the head.

"See if you want to be big and be the favorite you have to eat..." Zack wanted to reinforce the point, but Al wouldn't let him finish.

"I already said broccoli!" Al complained.

Mark had planned to study in his room. Zack didn't like his plan though. Seeing Mark going off with his books, he asked him about it.

"I don’t want to spread my stuff all over the house," Mark told him.

"You're not a ghost haunting the place. Don't be so invisible. It'll drive me crazy. Relax. You live here," Zack told him.

Mark wanted to point out that he lived in there, meaning his room, but that would have sounded ungrateful to Zack when he was trying so hard to make him feel welcome. So Mark settled himself on the couch.

After doing his work for a while, he stopped writing and looked up at the ceiling. He could see the curve of the lamp shade as its shadow was cast up there and enlarged. The sounds of Zack putting dishes in the dishwasher reached him from the kitchen. He didn’t let Mark do the dishes because it was his time off. Al was playing with PJ. Soon Zack would start trying to get him to go and get ready for bed.

"Want some iced tea?" Zack asked from the kitchen door. "Maybe you want coffee. If you're going to stay up late, I can make you coffee."

Zack stood in the doorway to the kitchen, glass of iced tea in hand. Mark stared at him like an idiot for a while.

"Sorry," Mark finally said and blinked a few times.

"You definitely need that coffee," Zack decided and was going to make some before Mark stopped him.

The way Zack sometimes fussed over him gave Mark a funny feeling. It was strange. Mark felt both heavy and light, but also all wrong. It was like he was at home. But no matter how he felt, that just wasn't true.

Now he heard the usual back and forth that was part of Al’s bedtime routine. Al always had an argument about why he shouldn’t go to bed yet. Zack always had a better one for why he should. In their exchange, Mark heard distorted echoes of his own family, just as he had when he lived with the Prestons. The world was full of families, parents and children. There was no end to the reminders. Mark wondered if he would ever see or hear parents with their children and not think of his own lost family.

It was well after Al’s bedtime when Zack found Mark asleep on the living room couch. He had a pile of books next to him and his laptop was open on the coffee table. Zack was glad that Mark studied in the

living room instead of his room. It was nice to have him there. Unfortunately, his head was at a funny angle, so Zack had to wake him. He touched his arm lightly.

"I told you you needed coffee."

"Sorry," Mark said as he straightened on the couch.

"What are you apologizing for?" Zack asked him with a laugh.

Mark didn't seem sure himself, but then he said, "For sleeping, I guess."

"And that's something to apologize for?"

Mark again looked confused. Then his answer came in the form of a question.

"I guess for sleeping on the job?"

"You're not on the job right now," Zack reminded him.

"Then I apologize for sleeping on the couch."

"I hope you can hear how lame that sounds."

"Maybe," Mark admitted. "But I'm really not supposed to be sleeping out here."

"Who says? I told you to make yourself comfortable. And if you ever end up doing something wrong, I'll tell you. And you can bet that I won't be subtle about it. Until then just assume you're doing everything right."

Mark looked up at him for a second then got busy with his books. Zack had noticed Mark doing things like that sometimes, like he was trying to hide from him. He hoped he wasn't making him uncomfortable.

Zack was walking away, but then he turned. He shouldn't have. All Mark did was stretch his spine. He raised his arms behind him. Resting his shoulders against the back of the couch, he pulled himself up and lifted his hips off the couch. Zack's cock stood up like someone rang a bell. What sort of man was he that everything Mark did gave him a hard-on? Zack had been on his way to his office, but rushed to his bathroom instead.

The only thing worse was later that night. Not able to sleep, Zack was finishing up some work in his office. Mark had gone to bed, so it seemed safe. But Mark got up and went into the kitchen. Seeing him rumpled from sleep made Zack hard all over again. Not able to take his eyes off him, Zack felt like he was taking him in, drinking in his effortless beauty. Zack could feel how warm he must be. He could guess that his bed was warm too, having been heated by him. He was too aware of Mark's body now, its shape, its dimensions, the span of his shoulders, the weight of his muscles. He imagined exploring his skin with a light touch that would turn firm to feel what was under the skin, to feel inside him. More than anything Zack wished to be touched by him the same way.

Chapter 10

Though Al accepted Mark immediately and obviously liked him, there were still some issues to iron out. Zack first noticed that Al's socks were by the couch in the living room. It was Saturday, and the three of them had gone to the park and then to lunch. The socks on the floor had every sign of being taken off in a hurry. One was half way inside out. The other one was balled up.

"Al, why are your socks here?" Zack asked when he saw Al coming down the hallway in his bare feet.

"What am I chopped liver?" Al said.

"What? What does that have to do with your socks?" Zack asked him.

Al shrugged.

"He keeps saying that," Zack complained to Mark, who poked his head from his room probably to see how Al would get the best of his father today.

"He heard it at Little Rainbow, but he doesn't know how to use it," Mark explained.

Zack knew he could look forward to Al misusing the phrase some more, but for now, he just wanted him to pick up after himself.

"Al, pick up your stuff."

"Make Mark do it," Al said.

Zack wished he had seen Mark's face when he heard that, but he had been too stunned to think to look at him. By the time he turned to him, Mark only stared at Zack expectantly.

"It's not Mark's job to pick up your stuff. It's his job to make you do it," Zack said to Al.

"Sorry, I..." Mark started to say, maybe thinking that Zack was reprimanding him.

"I was yelling at Al not you," Zack said to him. "He knows better than

to leave his chores for other people," Zack made sure that his voice was very stern. Leaning down to his eye level, he narrowed his eyes at Al. In response, Al mirrored him except he looked like he was squinting to see something on Zack's nose.

Mark broke up the staring contest. He got Al to pick up his socks and take them to the laundry. Then he took Al to his room to make him straighten up in there. From what Zack could hear, Al wasn't being too cooperative. Soon Al was back making a complaint to Zack.

"Mark is trying to punish me!"

"Good. Saves me the trouble," Zack said to him.

"You let Mark do whatever he wants!" Al accused.

"I'm letting Mark do his job. And for some reason, you are making Mark's job harder than it needs to be. Be a good kid for Mark, and he won't have to punish you."

Al stomped away not having gotten Zack on his side.

Zack hoped he had gotten through to him about how things worked. But what he heard a few days later let him know that Al still had the wrong idea. Instead of getting the message, Al was even more off track.

From his bedroom, Zack heard Al and Mark down the hall. Al was obviously giving him trouble.

"You put them away," Al said.

"No. Al, you know you need to pick up after yourself. We talked about this," Mark reminded him.

Zack also thought he had already settled this issue with Al, but apparently not.

"No. You do it. I'm your boss," Al said to Mark.

Hearing his son say this, Zack had to jump into this discussion. He walked over, and Al looked up at him. Zack smiled down at his kid.

"You're whose boss? You are Mark's boss? Is that right? How?" Zack questioned him.

"Because we pay him, and he works for us," Al said reasonably.

"We? Us? You have money in the bank I don't know about?" Zack leaned down to peer into Al's upturned face.

"No."

"Aha. So who made you Mark's boss then?"

"Gavin said..."

"Gavin made you the boss?" Gavin was one of those snotty, know-it-all kids at Little Rainbow. Every other day one of them was filling Al's head with something he didn't need to know.

Despite the interruption, Al pressed on.

"Gavin said that I was Mark's boss and that I could get him fired if I want, all I had to say was he hit me."

For a minute Zack was speechless.

"Wow! What did you ...?! Would you say that if he didn't hit you?" Zack asked once he could speak.

"No," Al said having no clue about the seriousness of that kind of accusation. Forget about getting him fired. That kind of thing could get poor Mark killed.

Zack leaned down and made sure he had Al's undivided attention.

"Let me set you straight. First, you never accuse anyone of doing something they didn't do. And Mark is the boss of you. You are no one's boss, you tiny, little man."

"I'm not a tiny man. I'm a kid," Al said in his defense.

"That's right. You're a kid, and Mark is your boss. And I am your boss too. Don't forget that," Zack said, but Al disagreed with that last point.

"You're not my boss. You're my dad."

"It's the same thing."

Al seemed to consider this for a minute.

"Is Mark my other dad like Gavin and Lily and Maggie and Lee have?"

Al asked breathlessly. His eyes grew wide with excitement. And a second ago he was talking about getting Mark fired.

"No! No." Zack looked at Mark for help. But of course Mark couldn't help him because he was too busy trying not to laugh at the whole thing. Zack was on his own.

"Al, if I ever get you another dad, I'll tell you about it. OK?" Zack assured Al.

"You don't need to get me another dad. Mark is already here."

"Al!"

"What?" he asked as if Zack was just calling him in from another room and not using his name to tell him to zip it.

Mark finally came to the rescue, though not with a straight face. He took Al by the hand and led him to his room to put away his books and toys.

After that, Zack asked Mark to be more take-charge with Al. Mark agreed, but he had his own way of doing things. Plus, he wasn't Al's parent, though he sometimes acted like one.

Once more Zack was hearing something alarming. This time it was Mark's raised voice.

"What do you think you were doing?!"

Zack stepped out of his office and saw that Mark was holding Al in his arms. Al looked a little stunned. Mark set him on his feet abruptly. Seeing Zack standing there with a questioning look, Mark explained.

"He was climbing the bookshelf," Mark said, still clearly angry about it.

It was a tall bookshelf and entertainment center. Zack remembered telling Al not to climb it when he was much younger. Mark must have grabbed Al off the shelf as he was climbing it, just as Zack had done once.

"You could have broken your neck," Zack said to Al who was still speechless.

"You are never to do that again!" Mark told him even more

vehemently.

"You can't yell at me," Al said to Mark. Over his shock now, he was suddenly teary eyed. This was probably the first time Mark had raised his voice to him.

"Yes, I can!" Mark said loudly as if to prove him wrong.

"Do you know how serious this is?!" Zack raised his voice too since Al was not really listening.

Al looked from Mark to his father with a pitiful expression on his face. He was looking at two angry faces with nowhere to turn to for comfort.

"You can't both yell. You are ganging up. You're mean," Al said now starting to cry in earnest.

Zack softened just a little. Mark still had the same angry look on his face.

"Fine. We won't gang up. Just Mark will yell at you this time. And you better listen." Zack compromised since Mark was doing such a good job. At first Mark looked uncertain about this arrangement but only for a moment. He was mad enough not to question it for now.

Al turned away from Mark though. Sniffing, first he turned his face to Zack then he turned away from both of them. But Mark wasn't having that.

"You are never to climb that shelf again. Do you hear me?" Mark asked in his strict voice. He turned Al's face back to him by his chin which was puckered and wrinkled from his almost crying. He touched his forehead to Al's.

"You're not going to climb up there again, are you?" Mark insisted. His voice was softer but still serious.

"PJ can climb," Al said though it was clear that Mark had gotten through to him.

"PJ should not be your role model. PJ licks herself," Zack told him.

"So?"

Zack just stared at Al. Then he turned to Mark. "You have an argument for that?"

Mark only smiled.

They exacted a promise from Al not to climb the shelf then sent him off to play. Mark was still wound up from what could have happened.

"The whole thing could fall on him. He so little, and he thinks he's invincible. And he doesn't listen. Everything is PJ, PJ," Mark ranted.

"Just so you know. The shelf is anchored to the wall," Zack reassured Mark at least about the shelf falling over.

"That's good. I should have known. I know I overreacted," Mark said, calming down a little.

"No, you didn't. He could still fall from there. And really, when you go off on him, it saves me the trouble. "

Though Mark might not have felt good about how he handled the situation, Zack did. It was proof of how much Mark cared. That wasn't the measured reaction of a stranger doing his job. That was the quick and angry reaction of a parent when a child puts himself in danger. Zack recognized it because he had done the same thing a number of times when Al did something crazy. He wanted to hug Mark and thank him, but he didn't dare.

Chapter 1

Though Zack still picked up Al after work, Mark was the one who took him to Little Rainbow. He sometimes got to see the other parents dropping off their kids. The couples who came there together always caught his eye. Mark tried not to stare at them, but in a way he wanted to memorize them.

Little Rainbow was a nice place, and the people who worked there were all friendly and kind. But Zack was right about the kids at Little Rainbow being little troublemakers. One day Al asked Mark, "What does not related mean?"

Mark could sense a possibly thorny issue behind that question so he didn't jump in with an answer. They were both sitting on the floor with books in their laps. Mark was doing some reading for school. Al was looking at one of his picture books. Sometimes he read a word he recognized. Now Mark put his book down. Al was looking at him, waiting for the answer.

"Who said that?" Mark wanted to know first.

"Clint said that he had a real dad. And me and some other kids don't have real dads. That me and Dad are not related," Al explained.

"Oh, it just means adopted." Mark considered that a safe answer since Al already knew about it.

"So it's not a bad thing," Al concluded from this. Then he elaborated on his family history, "Dad adopted me when my mom was sick, and she gave me to Dad as a present."

"You mean a gift," Mark tried to correct him.

"It's the same thing, Mark. Don't you know anything?"

"I'm pretty sure your dad said you were a gift not a present."

"It's the same thing!" Al said frustrated with Mark's ignorance.

Mark reported the conversation to Zack who told him he handled it well. Later that evening he heard Zack on the phone in his office telling his friend, Louise, about it over the phone.

"He has perfect instincts," Zack said.

Mark was pleased that Zack thought well of him, but he worried that if he thought too highly of him, Zack was bound to be disappoint eventually.

Zack loved catching up with Louise. He missed her, especially after having her living with him and Al. But even before that, he used to see her all the time. Now she lived so far away. He told her about Mark again and worried that he talked about him too much.

"So I guess he's adjusting to you guys," Louise concluded from the way Zack was singing his praises.

"What do you mean adjusting to us?" Zack pounced on her words.

"You know," she said, not even trying to be diplomatic.

"What do you mean 'you know'?"

"You know you two can be kind of a challenge," she told him.

"We're not a challenge. Me and Al are two great guys." Then Zack yelled so he could be heard in the living room, "Mark! Are we a challenge?"

"What?"

"Me and Al, are we a challenge?" Zack asked.

"No?" Mark said, clearly in the form of a question.

"Don't say it like a question."

"You're OK, I guess."

"Lukewarm crap like that does nothing to reassure me," he told Mark then got back on the phone with Louise.

"I heard some of that," she told him.

"You heard nothing. Everything is fine over here."

"Aha. Actually what I hear is that he's adjusting just fine. He has you right where he wants you."

Zack groaned because she was right. Mark had him all figured out.

That night Zack got up to get some water and got sidetracked when he went to looking in on Al. As he watched Al sleep, he turned to find Mark watching him. Zack came out of Al's bedroom quietly and went to join Mark. He only spoke when he was sure it wouldn't wake Al.

"I know it's weird," Zack said of what he had been doing.

"No. It's not. It's a parent's prerogative," Mark told him as they went into the kitchen.

"I just go in to check on him. But then ..." Zack couldn't describe the feeling. Looking at Al sleeping was almost miraculous. "It's like I'm hypnotized just by his breathing. Look at him. That's my kid. That's my Al. He's amazing. Just sleeping and drooling on his pillow, he's wonderful."

"God, you're sappy," Mark said in response.

"Hey. I was sharing a deep moment with you," Zack whined.

"That was deep?"

Zack almost said "What would you know?" But he remembered Mark's family situation just in time. He wondered if his mother and father had ever gazed at him while he slept. And if they did, how could they live with themselves now?

"They are very religious," Mark said making Zack think that he might have said something aloud.

"I could tell by the way you looked at me that you were thinking about me and my parents," Mark explained.

"I am not comfortable with you reading my mind. There's filthy stuff in there," Zack told him.

"I can handle it."

Zack cleared his throat and drank some of that water he had gotten up for. But after the initial awkwardness, Mark regarded him seriously.

"It's not easy to be a single parent," Mark said like he wanted to change the subject and give Zack an opening to talk to him.

"I have people I can count on. But I need Kelly. I need my dad and mom. I need everyone who's gone," Zack admitted.

"You'll just have to settle for me."

Zack couldn't help thinking, "But for how long?"

"But you're right," he told Mark. "I was so worried about what would happen to Al if I died, I asked Louise to adopt him."

"She didn't," Mark concluded.

"No. And I was a dick about it when she said she couldn't. I refused to see her side of it. I only thought of it as a precaution. But she didn't. I think she got worried that she would end up not having her own life and her own family if she got stuck with us. If she adopted Al, she would be his mother, and she wouldn't want to leave him. I don't think she could be a mother in name only, the way I wanted. So we had a fight about it. All my fault. Then I cam to my senses and we made up."

"You suffered too many deaths. You lost your mom and your grandmother when you were still a kid. Of course you were anxious for Al," Mark said.

"Don't act so young and wise."

Mark only smiled. It was wonderful how he understood him even at his most unreasonable. And he knew more about Zack than any of his friends. A while ago, he had asked Zack, "So what's your thing about punctuality?"

Zack sighed then gave Mark the short version.

"The only time my mom wasn't on time to pick me up was because she was dead."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

"Waiting for someone always reminded me of waiting for her. The dread building as time passes. And I didn't even know what to dread until my dad told me she was gone. I don't think I even knew in my heart at that age that parents could die. My grandmother died soon after that," Zack had told him.

He wondered what it meant that he wanted to talk to Mark about

things he never wanted to discuss with anyone else. It wasn't like Zack to confide in anyone lightly. But Mark brought out all sorts of things in him. It would be easier if he was simply attracted to him. But he felt so much more, too much. In fact, earlier than night he had wanted to ask Mark to sit and watch a movie with him. But Al was already in bed so he didn't. He was worried that it was too much like what they would do if they were in a relationship. It was safer to do things with him when Al was there. At times like this, with Al asleep, too many barriers were down between them. Even though they were both in a thoughtful mood, Mark was painfully hard to resist.

Chapter 12

Mark had come in late one evening having gone to the library. He found Al right in front of the door as he came in. He watched as Mark toed off his sneakers.

"You have to untie them. It's the rule," Al told him.

Mark just smiled at him. When he went into the kitchen a little later, Al was telling on him to Zack.

"Mark doesn't have to untie his shoes. Only you have to untie your shoes," Zack told Al.

"No fair."

"You know what I'm going to say next. I'll give you a hint. It starts with he is big and you are little, and it ends with eat your broccoli."

Al groaned.

Zack was sitting at the kitchen table working on his laptop. Behind him the dishwasher was going. As well as the lemony, dish detergent smell, Mark could smell something that had been cooked earlier. It made him kind of hungry.

"Your class let out a while ago, right?" Zack asked.

"I needed to go to the library for some research. Did you need me to do something?" Mark asked not sure if Zack was complaining about his lateness.

"Oh, no. You're off duty until tomorrow morning," Zack said.

Now Mark had the impression that Zack had been wondering who kept him out so late, and he was now relieved to find out he was only at the library.

"I made a green been stew if you want some," Zack offered.

"Yuck," was Al's vote on the stew.

"You said it tasted good, it just looked bad," Zack reminded him of his

earlier critique.

"Don't eat it, Mark," Al still warned him.

"I'll just have a little bit to see if it's as bad as you say," Mark said.

Al gave him a sympathetic look as he pulled out the plastic container from the refrigerator.

"You're a brave man," Zack said sarcastically.

Al agreed and not sarcastically then he went off.

With a bowl of warmed up stew, Mark sat across from Zack to eat. He didn't know why, but it gave him a tingling in the pit of his stomach. Maybe it was because Al wasn't there, and the table was small, putting them at an intimate distance from each other. He was glad Zack was only looking at the laptop screen and ignoring him since he didn't know if his face would betray his strange feelings. After Mark had a few bites, Zack turned his attention to him. He leaned his elbow on the table, propped up his chin in his hand, and asked, "So how is it?"

Mark faked feeling ill at ease, though he did feel funny as Zack stared right into his eyes.

"You are putting me on the spot now," Mark said and looked down at his bowl of green stew.

"You stinker," Zack told him.

"It's good," Mark admitted.

"But you had to torture me first?"

"Just following the house rules." The rule Mark was following was that you should tease whoever you can at every opportunity.

"I set a bad example. And you catch on fast," Zack said ruefully, but then gave Mark a sneaky smile.

It was the middle of the week and Mark and Al had come back from touring two different playgrounds. Al had declared the first one they went to "for babies". The second one was more to his liking, and they got to see some skaters in action on a steep path going down to the river. Now they were home and discussing what to have for lunch just as Zack called Mark from work.

"Hey. If you're not busy, you and Al should drop by my office, and we'll go for lunch somewhere," Zack told him.

Mark agreed. He wondered how often Zack was going to treat him to meals. Al was excited to go. Mark was too a little. Both Zack and Mia worked there, though she had already given her notice. Mark had never visited her at work, and he was curious about the place. It would be nice if he got a chance to see Mia since it wouldn't be long before the Prestons were gone.

Zack had called up Mark on an impulse. He missed him and Al and decided to indulge himself. As soon as they walked in, Al was off.

"There he goes," Zack said as Al ran straight to Yuka's office. She had the best models of the spaces and structures she had designed, and Al couldn't stay away. "OK. He gets five minutes in there," Zack explained to Mark. "Yuka's rule. Then she'll start yelling to get him out of her hair. That's your cue to go in and drag him out, preferably without knocking anything down."

Mark nodded as he looked around the place. Noticing that he was impressed, Zack was pleased. As George approached, Zack sighed.

"That's George, and I apologize for him in advance," he told Mark.

"Why?" Mark asked.

"I don't know yet. But there'll be something." Zack shrugged. George could be counted on to embarrass him especially in front of a good looking guy, though Zack tried not to think of Mark that way. Like that was even possible.

"God, is this him? The manny?" George asked with astonishment which sounded almost like horror. As he circled Mark for a better look, his eyes roamed up and down Mark's body. "Maggie would love him. She would just eat him up with a spoon, and there would be nothing left but his clothes."

Zack interposed himself between them before George scared Mark and send him running into the street.

"It may be hard to tell but Maggie is George's wife," Zack explained, not that saying that explained anything because there was no explaining George or Maggie for that matter.

George turned to Zack and grabbed him by the shoulders.

"She can never see him," he said conspiratorially. "She would steal him away and money would be no object."

"You don't need a nanny. You don't even have kids yet," Zack told him.

"That wouldn't stop her. Look how devastatingly cute he is. The way his ass sticks out, you just want to take a bite out of it. You have to hide him."

"Stop it," Zack warned George.

"How can I? Look at that ass. It looks like it's never been sat on."

"Oh my God. Just stop." Zack turned to Mark again. He was now blushing a little.

"It may also be hard to tell that George is straight."

"But I have trained myself to recognize male beauty so I would know a threat to my marriage when I see one," George claimed.

"I'll keep him under wraps," Zack promised just as Yuka started yelling.

"Let's introduce you to Yuka," Zack said as they headed to her office. "She may not sound like it right now, but she is the sane one."

"Aren't you the sane one?" Mark asked.

"Ha! No. I'm the uptight, number-crunching one with no talent."

Mark smiled at that just as they went into Yuka's office. Once he got a look at the place, he was mesmerized. The models were mounted on the walls or placed on glass shelves. Some of them were places they had designed for clients, some were only there to impress and would be exorbitant to build in the real world.

"Could these really be constructed?" Mark asked seeing the near impossibility, or at least the challenge presented by some of the designs.

"Absolutely," Yuka answered as she always did. She firmly stood by her designs. Of course the cost of actual building was someone else's problem. Cost was something they had to consider when designing for actual clients though, that was where Zack came in.

As Zack introduced them, Mark looked around the office again, this time searching for Al.

"The little monster is under the desk as usual," Yuka said. Her desk was a hulking, metal monstrosity in the midst of glass, the models, and pale gray walls. It had been converted from some piece of machinery, and it looked both scary and kind of cool.

"She has purple shoes," Al said from under there. That was Yuka's trademark. She wore subdued colors, impeccably tailored skirts and jackets, and colorful, high heeled shoes. Al always ended his visits to her office by crawling under her desk to see what color shoes she was wearing that day.

"Get out of there," Zack told him.

Mark held Al's hand to restrain him as they left Yuka's office to visit George's. Mark tried to take it all in while Al chattered next to him. It was an impressive place, and not just Yuka's office. There was metal and glass everywhere but also touches of creativity and humor. In George's office there was a huge model of a floor plan attached upside down to his ceiling. Al immediately climbed on the chair then the desk to try and reach it with both Mark and Zack playing his safety net.

"Still not tall enough," George said.

"Aah!" Al lamented even though he was a good distance away from the target.

As he jumped down with his father's help, he said "Broccoli" exactly as if it was a curse word.

Next they headed to Zack's office, which Al pronounced "boring". Mark had again noticed the way Zack treated him. There was nothing perfunctory about it. Mark was sure this was how Zack would show the office to a visiting friend. The other people working there had also not dismissed him as just the nanny though that was how Zack introduced him. Several of them he had to correct when they said, "So this is your nanny."

"Al’s nanny," Zack would say like he knew they did it deliberately. But Mark could tell that the people who worked with Zack liked him but didn’t take him lightly. There was always plenty of respect in their interactions.

Mark wished that he could have seen Mia, but she had gone to take care of some paperwork for her trip. She had booked him for lunch later that week when she would probably grill him about Zack.

Mark was glad he got to meet her boss though. Yuka hadn't been very friendly, but he knew not to take it personally. Mia had often spoken about her. She called her intimidating, insanely talented, and scary. Adding to that, Yuka was a little severe looking with her hair pulled back, and she didn't smile. George had been a little terrifying. Tall, almost hulking, with his large frame and curly hair, he was all energy and broad gestures. He was kind of overwhelming but also seemed good natured and uninhibited. His designs, which Zack pointed out in the form or models and photographs, were very disciplined and balanced with traditional touches that probably put the more conservative clients at ease even if his demeanor didn't.

Zack's office was as Al had described it. There were shelves of binders, framed photos of structures on the walls. The furniture was more conservative than in the rest of the office. It was still modern but toned down. Mark guessed that he probably didn't meet with clients in there, and if he did, it was to reassure them that there was someone there with his feet firmly planted on the ground. There were pictures of Al on his desk, of course.

"See? Boring," Al said of his father's office.

"Well, your boring old dad is taking you to lunch at Jojo's. How's that?"

"Yey! Jojo's!" Al said. He was delighted while Mark was worried. From Al's reaction, he feared that Jojo's might be some kind of kiddie restaurant where everything was plastic and they served bad pizza.

It wasn't. It was a diner, but Mark could tell right away why Al liked it. Cheerful oldies were playing in the background and yellow vinyl booths were lined up on one side of the diner. A long counter with swivel chairs was on the other. Al wanted to sit at the counter and swivel, but Zack said they would take a booth. The main attraction for Al was the walls decorated with photos of giant foods with people holding them or standing next to them. There were giant fruits and vegetables, and also giant cooked foods like cupcakes, hamburgers, stacks of pancakes, cookies and pizzas. Al led Mark all around the place showing him the ones that impressed him and asking how long it would take to eat them. Now and then he would demand to be

picked up so he could have a better look at the pictures higher up on the wall. By the time they went all around the diner, Zack was already seated and looking through the menu.

"Yes, they have normal food too," he announced just as Al and Mark sat down, Al sliding into the booth first.

"Let's have the big hamburger," Al said without pretending to read the menu.

"I told you, you can have the giant hamburger when you win the Nobel Prize or graduate high school, whichever comes first," Zack told him.

Al grumbled and kicked his feet under the table.

"Can I have the giant pickle then?"

"I told you it's just a pickled cucumber."

"Aren't they all?" Mark asked, but he was drowned out by Al insisting, "No, it's not. It's a real giant pickle."

"Fine, you can have it," Zack told him. Then he said to Mark, "You'll be taking most of it home with you. Giant pickle," he said while shaking his head.

Most of the food was what you'd expect on a diner menu with a few of the items available in giant sizes. Noticing the prices were a little higher than he expected, Mark looked for some cheaper selections.

"The Philly cheese steak is really good here," Zack recommended.

It wasn't one of the cheaper options. Mark saw the bacon mac and cheese, but it wasn't cheep either. He settled on soup and salad while Al tried to talk him into the giant hamburger in a loud whisper.

They gave their orders to a nice waitress with a friendly smile who happily chatted with Al about giant food before getting to Mark.

"No. Sorry. I'm vetoing that," Zack said when he heard Mark's selection. "I'm having a Philly cheese steak with fries. And while I'm having that, I can't be watching you eat a salad."

"I thought you were all for eating healthy," Mark said to him.

"Not when we eat out and not when you have an ulterior motive. We

talked about this. We shook on it, man. Now order something decent," Zack urged him.

"You mean Mark can't order what he wants either?" Al asked for clarification since he had trouble following what his father was saying to Mark.

Mark looked at Zack for the answer to Al's question. Zack looked sheepish, almost like he might cave and let Mark order for himself, but instead he switched tactics. "This is hardly an expensive restaurant. Please order something else otherwise I'll feel guilty for dragging you out here. OK?"

Damn, he got him. Now Mark had to give in.

"I thought I might have the bacon mac and cheese," Mark said reluctantly.

"There you go. Now you're living," Zack said happy to get his way.

Chapter 13

Zack was ready to send Al to bed, but it looked like he was busy. He and Mark were looking for something in the living room.

"Is this it?" Al asked.

"No. It's a white paper," Mark said.

Zack saw that Al was holding up a junk mail circular for an office supply store.

"Are you helping?" Zack asked Al.

"Yes."

"It's the thought that counts," he told Al then asked Mark, "What are you looking for?"

"I had a paper with an assignment on it."

"Did you draw on the back of Mark's paper?" Zack asked Al, who was his number one suspect.

Al denied it, but Zack didn't believe he would know even if he did. He made Al bring all his drawings.

"I bet he did something with it," he said as Al went off perfectly happy to share his many drawings with an unwilling audience.

"Maybe it was you," Mark said as he flipped sofa cushions.

"No. It was Al. I'm the good one."

Al came in with an armful of drawings eager to show them off.

"Not there," Zack said after he examined them. "I'll look in the trash."

Before Zack had to do anything so drastic, Al spotted the paper.

"Dad will help us," Al announced.

"With what?" Zack said as he went back into the living room and saw Mark down on his knees next to a cabinet trying to fish something out

from underneath with a wire hanger.

"Al found the paper. It slipped under here. I've been trying to sneak it out with this hanger, but I'm just mangling it. Maybe we could move it?" Mark asked, getting up.

"Oh yeah. Check these out." Zack flexed his arms. "Out of the way."

Al and Mark both moved away from the cabinet.

"I just meant Al. This is a two man job. Give me a hand. This thing is heavy," Zack said to Mark

Mark pretended to look disappointed.

"I saw you flexing. I thought I might see some kind of manly feat of strength or something," Mark said.

"Get over here and help me."

"Lift with your legs!" Al told them.

They both laughed and almost dropped the thing. Zack noticed how strong Mark was then tried to put it out of his mind. Even after the paper was rescued and the cabinet was back in place, Zack couldn't stop thinking about Mark's muscles. Zack wanted to run his hands over Mark's body, feel every muscle flex and harden. He tried to get the thoughts of Mark doing heavy lifting out of his mind the only way he knew how. He ducked into the bathroom and spent some quality time with his dick in his hand. Mark certainly kept his hand busy.

Mark was at one of his classes. Zack had noticed his laptop on the couch but didn't think to move it somewhere more secure. Even when he heard Al making a lot of noise in the living room, he didn't worry. Earlier, he had seen Al stomping through the house chasing PJ while growling. He figured this was just more of the same. Then there was a thud, and things got suspiciously quiet. Zack got up from his desk and went out into the living room, expecting disaster. Mark's laptop was no longer on the couch. It was on the floor at Al's feet.

"You want to make a confession?" Zack asked.

"It was an accident," Al pleaded.

"Accidents happen when you're not being careful," Zack told him.

"I was playing," Al said like that was any kind of excuse.

"Play more carefully. Mark probably has very important stuff on there. What if he flunks his class because of you?" Zack wasn't worried about the laptop itself. He could just buy him a new one, a better one. He was dying to do that anyway. But Mark might lose all the files on there.

"Sorry," Al said mournfully.

"A sorry doesn't fix everything," Zack told him.

"Sorry!" Al said at full volume this time.

"A really loud sorry doesn't fix everything either."

Al waited worriedly for Mark to come home. When he did, Zack told him, "Better check your laptop. Al knocked it off the couch."

"You're telling on me!" Al complained looking scared as Mark went over to open up the laptop and check it over.

"I shouldn't have left it there," Mark said.

"Al needs to be careful with other people's stuff," Zack said in a stern voice and also gave Mark a look. He wanted to let him know that this was about Al learning an important lesson and not about Mark taking responsibility for Al's carelessness.

Mark got the message. From where he was standing, Zack could see that the laptop started up OK, but Al couldn't see that.

"Al, if it's broken, you'll have to buy me a new laptop," Mark told him.

"Dad will buy it."

"No, Al. Your dad didn't break it. You'll have to buy it."

"But it's expensive," Al whined.

Seeing a perfect opening, Zack jumped in.

"That's why you have to be careful with other people's expensive things."

Since Al looked properly chastened, Mark looked at the laptop screen

gravely. After a dramatic pause, he announced, "It looks like it's OK. This time."

"I'll be careful," Al promised.

As he walked past Zack with the laptop under his arm, Mark asked, "Happy?"

"Yes. You are a natural," Zack confirmed though his grin said as much.

He then addressed himself to Al.

"That was a close call. You got lucky this time, mister, didn't you?"

"Yeah," Al agreed.

"Go write the sorry. A big one," Zack told him.

"Not a big one," Al protested.

"Yes, a big one," Zack said.

Al went to the kitchen. When he was done, he showed off his handiwork first to his father then to Mark as he came back from his bedroom.

"Is that the laptop?" Mark asked when he saw the drawing on the back of the sorry. "And is PJ there for a reason?" he asked when he saw what passed for a cat in Al's drawings.

"I was chasing PJ when I knocked down the laptop."

"Should PJ write a sorry?" Mark asked.

Al shook his head.

"PJ is illiterate," Al said.

Mark laughed and looked at Zack since it sounded like something he would say about a cat.

Though Al was on his best behavior for the rest of the evening, Zack still sent him to bed a little earlier than usual that night. Of course Al argued with him about it, but he finally seemed to accept his fate but only grudgingly.

"Now go get ready for bed," Zack said to him and sent him on his way.

Then he heard Al grumbled something that made him call Al back.

"What a nerd," Al had said as he headed for his room.

"What? Wait. Al, where did you hear that?" Zack asked fully expecting Al to say that he heard it from some kid at Little Rainbow.

Instead Al said, "Mark."

"Mark?" Turning to the guilty party sitting on the couch with his laptop on his lap, Zack pointed an accusing finger. "You? You Judas! Why did you teach him that?"

Mark only shook his head at first because he was trying not to laugh.

"I didn't. But he might have heard me say it on the phone," Mark admitted. Then seeing Zack's look, he quickly added, "I didn't say it about you." Mark put up his hand like he was going to take a pledge, but Zack was still skeptical since Mark was smirking the whole time.

That reminded Zack that he had heard Mark talking on the phone earlier. He wasn't eavesdropping, but he did hear that Mark was arranging to meet some friends later. Zack wondered if Mark wanted to have them drop by but couldn't because Zack had made it a rule that he couldn't have friends over. Zack didn't love the idea of having Mark's friends coming over, but if Mark lived here then he should be able to have friends visit him. Having made his decision, Zack groaned inwardly and went to tell Mark about it.

"My own child is calling me a nerd because of you." Zack pouted as he sat down next to Mark.

"Sorry," Mark said but he didn't sound sincere.

Seeing that he wasn't going to get any sympathy, Zack moved on to what he needed to tell him. Hearing that he could have friends over, Mark joked that he would throw a wild party immediately. Zack couldn't leave it at that though. He had to make it clear that Mark couldn't bring dates home. Mark probably wouldn't do that anyway. He had good judgment. Even so Zack felt he had to make sure and say it anyway, he hesitated over the words.

"Friends only though. No dates. No one sleeps over," Zack looked away. He wasn't sure what kind of look Mark might give him. Because of his true motive, Zack felt like he had no right to say that to Mark. But Mark accepted it, and they both pretended that it was for Al's

sake. While that was part of the reason, there was no doubt in Zack's mind that he couldn't handle seeing Mark with anyone else. Just the thought of it made him crazy. It wasn't just jealousy though. It was fear that was gripping his heart. He didn't even have Mark the way he wanted him, and he was still deathly afraid of losing him.

Chapter 14

These days Mark and Al were both seeing Zack off as he went to work in the morning.

"Who is my good boy?" Zack said as he kissed Al's face before he left.

"Me! And Mark too," Al told him.

Zack gave Mark a look but didn't say anything. Mark always had to convince himself not to read anything into those looks. It wasn't easy though. If Mark had seen any other guy looking at him the way Zack looked at him, he would have gone right up to him knowing that the guy wanted him. But, really, he couldn't imagine that same look on anyone but Zack. If it wasn't just wishful thinking, Zack's look said a lot more than "I want you." It said everything Mark had ever wanted to hear. It promised sex and love and everything good in life. It was too bad Mark had to put it out of his mind. Thank God Al was there to take his mind off Zack.

They were sitting on the floor in the living room with a map of the world in front of them. Mark was teaching Al a little geography and telling him where different animals lived. That's what started Al about first grade. He wanted to know if it was really different from kindergarten, that kind of thing. Mark tried to be both accurate and reassuring with his answers. Then Al said that Miss Avril wasn't going to be his teacher any more. He looked sad about that. And next thing he knew, Al was asking questions about Mark.

"Are you going to live with me and Dad forever?" Al turned and looked at him.

"No," Mark answered simply and honestly.

"Why not?" Al's question was a little petulant.

"People don't live together forever."

"Why?"

"They just don't. When you grow up, you won't live with your dad either," Mark tried to explain. But Al just didn't believe this last piece

of information.

"Yes, I will."

"No. And you won't want to," Mark assured him.

"I will too," Al said without any doubt.

"You'll see."

Al frowned not believing it. No, it seemed impossible that this little guy would grow up into someone who would want to leave home and live on his own. Mark could imagine that Zack wouldn't find it easy to let him go. Thinking about a child leaving home, Mark couldn't help thinking about himself and his own parents. He was sure that Al would never know the feeling of being unwelcome in his own home, the lost feeling, the fear, the loneliness of it. But Mark couldn't dwell on that. For now at least, there was this place for him.

Here Mark felt welcome as well as needed. He could have managed somehow even if Mia hadn't arranged for Zack to hire him. With that, Mark had even more to thank her for.

Now that he was older, it was different from when Mia first took him in. That was a truly desperate time. She and Frank had let him live with them for three years. Knowing that it wasn't always easy for them to have him around made him even more grateful to them. But Zack was different. To him, Mark wasn't a charity case. It was strange though that Zack never showed any signs of Mark being in the way. When Zack's eyes searched for him and found him, he looked happy. Not as happy as when he saw Al, of course. The look he gave Mark was a look almost of relief. It said, "Thank God you're here." If he really felt that way, it was odd. Even before Mark came along, Zack had been doing fine with Al and everything else that Mark now helped him with. And Zack could have easily made other arrangements for Al over the summer. Mark was glad he hadn't done that and that, for some reason, Zack found him necessary in his life. It was a good feeling, a feeling Mark craved. Of course there were all those other cravings too that Zack brought out in him. Sometimes Mark wondered how close he was to the edge. Maybe just the brush of Zack's fingertips might set him off, send him rushing at Zack to reveal his naked desire for him.

To distract both himself and Al, Mark decided that they should make a calendar to count down the days to the start of first grade. They got a big piece of construction paper. Mark had drawn the grid, and Al was

adding the numbers when he made a request.

"Mark, I want you to be my second dad," Al said.

Instead of telling him that there was nothing he would like more, Mark took a deep breath.

"Thank you, Al. But it's not up to you," Mark told him kindly.

"Why not? I can pick my own second dad." To Al it seemed perfectly reasonable.

"Did you choose Zack to be your first dad?" Mark said, leading him.

"No. I was a baby," Al said in that tone he used when he thought grown ups were dumb.

"Who picked Zack to be your dad?"

Al thought about it for a second.

"My mom."

"See. Now it's up to your dad to choose a second dad for you. Or not," Mark added since Zack might stay single, especially the way things were going.

"But I already like you," Al whined.

"Maybe you'll like someone else even better," Mark suggested.

Al shook his head, denying the possibility. Then he brightened again with a new idea.

"Make Dad pick you! You can do it," he said, getting enthusiastic. "Then I can tell the other kids at Little Rainbow that I have two dads."

Mark wondered if that was his real motive for asking Mark to be his dad.

"So two is better than one. What about three?" Mark asked.

Al grew thoughtful.

"I don't know. No one has three." Al had a look in his eyes like he was considering how he might get himself three dads just so he could lord it over the other kids.

Al's request made Mark wonder if there would ever be another dad for Al. It seemed that Zack had constructed his life solely around his son. Mark wasn't sure that Zack ever dated. There had been no dates that Mark knew about so far. But if Zack met up with anyone during the day, Mark naturally wouldn't know anything about it.

In fact, that evening some of Zack's friends were coming by. Al had announced it by saying, "The gay guys are coming to drink up all the booze." Apparently, that's what Zack said once and like a parrot, Al was now repeating it. Mark offered to take Al to a movie to minimize Zack's embarrassment and so the guys could have an adult evening. Mark was hoping to get to meet them. If he was honest with himself, he wasn't comfortable with his real reason. He wanted to see if any of them was a potential rival.

Zack was setting up some bottles of wine on the big dining table. There were also other goodies including some fancy version of regular snacks and some stuff from the deli. Al had to be restrained from conducting a taste test of this unfamiliar food, which Zack called drinking food.

"But I just want to lick it," Al said like that was a reasonable request.

Zack let Al have a few things to munch on. Al pronounced them pretty good.

"The gay guys like booze," Al said to Mark.

Zack shook his head.

"I made the mistake of calling them the gay guys and maybe I mentioned the booze once or twice," Zack confessed.

"Sounds like fun," Mark said noncommittally.

"Stan and Derrick just got back from a month long trip to Asia. They are going to torture us with videos and pictures they took there. Their place is still being renovated. It was supposed to be finished while they were on their tour, but of course it wasn't so we're doing it here," Zack explained.

Mark noted that Zack had friends who renovated while touring Asia and owned places they could renovate. It only highlighted the difference between him and Zack. Even when Mark had his own place, it wouldn't be the kind one renovates. It would be a place one shares

with roommates and cockroaches and hopes not to be evicted from. Just as Mark decided he wouldn't fit in, Zack invited him to meet them.

"You can stay if you want," Zack offered. "Once you meet everyone, you'll know if you want to stick around or use Al as your excuse to run. But be warned, it will be like meeting George, except there will be five of them. And instead of just sounding gay, they'll all be gay. I cannot guarantee your safety."

"I think I'll skip it this time," Mark said.

"Sure. It's better to meet them some other time when they aren't all assembled into a battle formation."

Zack was both sad and relieved that Mark wasn't going to be joining them. He would have liked to have Mark there, but the inevitable innuendo was bound to embarrass them both. It was good to have Al out of his hair though. That way he and his friends could all relax and not censor themselves.

"Where is he?" Leon asked as soon as he was through the door. All of the others had already arrived, and all of them were disappointed to hear Mark wasn't there. Every single one of them accused Zack of hiding him.

"Are you looking for Al, maybe?" Zack pretended not to know what Leon was talking about.

"Yeah, right. Maybe in several years time," Leon said. "Where is your boy toy? Let me see him."

"He is not here, and he is not my boy toy."

"But you knew who I meant when I said boy toy, didn't you?" Leon loomed over him making Zack feel both short and pale.

"Like it was hard to guess," Zack said as he handed him a glass of wine.

Actually as everyone was assembled there, Zack wished that Mark had stayed. He had a strong urge to show him off to his friends. And he didn't want to show him off as Al's nanny. He wanted Mark to stand next to him the way Derrick and Stan stood. They were unmistakably a couple, obviously together, connected by something invisible. They

were now teasing Leon for bragging that he was a magnet for white girls because he looked like a basketball player. Then there was some predictable stuff about baskets and balls. Owen told them about his nocturnal exploits, including one in a parked car that wasn't all the way in park. They all laughed and took turns being laughed at. Derrick and Stan's videos and pictures were shown only when they were all drunk enough to appreciate them. But the more fun Zack had, the more he wished Mark was with him to share in it.

It was well past Al's bedtime by the time he and Mark got back. He was both sleepy and grumpy, but he perked up as soon as they got home. Zack greeted them at the door. As Al went past him to see if any snacks were left, Mark lingered.

"You're a little drunk aren't you?" he whispered to Zack. He had noticed that his face was red, and his smile was goofier than usual.

"Yes, and we had an orgy," Zack whispered back.

"Dad is drunk!" Al announced.

Zack laughed then swooped down on Al.

"Look at my smart boy," he said to Al in a funny voice as he tickled him.

"See," Al said between giggles. It was definitely an interesting sight.

Then Zack wobbled over and slumped to the couch.

"Go tickle Mark. I'm not allowed to," Zack said to his kid.

Al obeyed quickly, but still asked, "Why aren't you allowed to?"

"It would be sexual harassment or something," Zack said as Mark tried to shush him.

"What? What?" Al asked first his father then Mark. He had a funny look on his face over the word "sexual".

"It's just a rule. That's all," Mark told him and sent him to get ready for bed.

"What? Did I say too much?" Zack said as he leaned back and looked up at Mark. The way Zack was sprawled there, Mark wanted to jump him. He was half lying on the couch with his long legs flung out and

his clothes a little disarranged. He was relaxed, loose, like he wanted Mark to crawl all over him. Mark hurried off to help Al get ready for bed. He would deal with the drunk later, or if he was smart, not at all. Mark really wished he was smart.

Since it was so late, Al was asleep in record time. Mark went to check on Zack. He found him still on the couch, pretty much the way he had left him.

"You ready to go to bed?" Mark asked Zack, not meaning to be provocative.

"Any time you want me, I'm yours," Zack said. He did mean to be provocative.

"You need to go sleep that off," Mark told him meaning both the booze and his sexy mood.

Though Mark wasn't going to offer any physical help, Zack reached out his hand to be helped up. Mark took his hand with predictable result. His body seemed to be wired for Zack, with every touch sending electric currents through him. This one shot up his arm then spread all over. Then there was another one as Mark supported Zack, circling his arm around his waist, resting the palm of his hand on his lower back. Mark's brain was fried. The hardness of Zack's body was intoxicating, a contact high. Zack leaned his face into Mark's shoulder and sniffed him.

"Look at you. You smell so good," Zack said breathing his breath into Mark's face as he did.

"Unlike some people," Mark told him. His breath was kind of sobering.

"Aww, no. Don't say I stink. Come on, say I don't stink," Zack pleaded as Mark led him to his room.

"You don't stink that much," Mark said. That was the best he could do.

As they entered the darkness of Zack's bedroom, Mark knew he was helping Zack get to bed only as an excuse. This way he could be close to him, have his hands on him. And it was also a way to risk something happening between them.

Mark let Zack drop on the bed. Zack looked up at him.

"Aren't you going to undress me for bed?" Zack asked as Mark lifted his legs to the bed.

"No," Mark said hiding his regret. Zack wasn't really drunk enough to need that much help. Mark was willing to take off his shoes for him, but he wasn't wearing any.

"At least take off my belt," Zack told him. He raised his hips offering Mark more than his belt.

"Do it yourself. I'm going to stay away from that whole area," Mark told him though that area was exactly where he wanted to get busy. He resisted temptation even when Zack gave him an alluring, blue eye look that would have melted glass.

"Aww. No fun," Zack whined. How could he look so sexy when he was just lying there, a little drunk, eyes glued to Mark. And Mark had to leave him like that. He felt an almost physical pull toward Zack's bed, toward his body. It was like all Mark had to do was let go, and he would fall into bed with him.

As he went to his own room, Mark was already playing what didn't happen through his mind. His dick was hard and only getting harder as he thought about how he would lie on top of Zack and kiss him. He would undress him and fuck him so hard, Zack wouldn't be able to forget one second of it even if he was ten times as drunk as he was.

Zack forced his eyes to open, ready to be pissed off at whoever was nudging him awake. It was PJ.

"Are you kidding me?" Zack asked the cat.

Instead of answering, she walked over his chest like he was a sidewalk or the kitchen counter in PJ's case. Looking past PJ's butt, which was nearly in his face, Zack saw Mark and Al peering into the room.

"Did you two put her up to this?" Zack asked them since they certainly looked guilty.

"It worked," Al said to Mark with an evil little grin on his face.

Mark was smiling less evilly, but he wasn't denying responsibility either.

"You know, I used to keep my alarm clock far away from my bed

because otherwise I would throw it across the room when it woke me up," Zack said slowly, but he still had to wait for Al to get his meaning.

Eventually, Al caught on. He frowned fiercely at Zack. Keeping that look on his face, he marched into Zack's bedroom and took PJ off the bed. Then with an indignant look back at his father, he carried the cat out of the room. He walked away holding PJ protectively while whispering reassurances in her twitching ear.

"Was that the hangover talking?" Mark asked him, or more like reprimanded him.

"You just couldn't let me sleep late," Zack grumbled as he started to sit up.

"What time do you think it is?" Mark asked in a pointed way that told Zack that it was much later than he thought.

"So that's why you had the cat attack me in my sleep," Zack said. Mark ignored his blatant exaggeration and left him to get himself up and ready.

Zack took a seat on the couch with a cup of coffee in his hand. Al was drawing on the coffee table. Mark was sitting next to him with a book for class, which he wasn't reading.

"Al, you know that your dad would never throw PJ like an alarm clock, right?" Mark looked pointedly at Zack as he said this. He probably wanted him to confirm it.

"I know. Dad loves PJ," Al said without looking up from his drawing.

"Says who? I do not," Zack said.

"Yes, you do. You love PJ. I saw you kissing her and hugging her," Al accused then giggled as he remembered witnessing his father being sweet to the cat.

"I wasn't kissing her. She was kissing me," Zack said in his defense. Turning to Mark he said, "I would never kiss a cat. Or a girl."

After Al went off, and it was just him and Mark in the living room, Zack apologized for his behavior the night before. Reminded of it, Mark blushed. A deep red suffused his skin. How could anyone resist

him? When Mark blushed Zack just wanted to kiss him so much. Instead, he made a confession.

"I can't remember the last time I drank that much. I think when Louise visited a year ago. She’s a bad influence. I usually feel like I'm the permanent designated driver."

"Because of Al," Mark guessed.

"Yeah."

"You were the designated driver. But now I am," Mark reminded him.

"Only until you're legal. Then we'll take turns getting drunk off our asses and being otherwise irresponsible."

"But not together?" Mark asked.

The question sounded suggestive to both of them. They stared at each other for a minute like they were both waiting for the other one to say something. Then they both laughed.

Chapter 15

The time for the Prestons to leave was approaching. Mark had already had lunch with Mia. Then he had gone to the mall with both Mia and Dorie as they shopped for their trip. Now that their departure was so close, they were having a farewell party for their friends. Mark wished that he could have stayed away from the party that night and just waited to say goodbye to them more privately. He wanted to thank them again for everything they did for him. Though he considered making a speech and tanking them in front of everyone, he wasn't sure he was brave enough. Mark was already missing them even though they were right there. The invitation to the party included Zack and Al too, so all three of them went.

Dorie met them at the door.

"Hey, Miss Bossy," Mark greeted her.

"I'm not Miss Bossy. You are Mr. Bossy," she said as she hugged him. She sounded a little funny because of her braces. She greeted Zack and Al more shyly.

"I wish you were going with us," she said to Mark.

"You'll have fun over there even without me," Mark assured her.

"But I'll miss you," she said.

She told them where all the kids were going to be for the party. With a roll of her eyes, she said that Mrs. Duval was there to baby-sit. She took Al by the hand so they could join the other kids. Al looked up at her as they walked away.

"We'll take good care of Mark for you," Al promised her.

Mark and Zack went in together but then split up. Frank took Mark aside and reminded him that if he ever needed a place to stay, his aunt with two smelly dogs had agreed to let him have her spare room.

"We can always wire you money if you need it. And don’t take any crap from that Zack. He can be kind of a prick. Just stand your

ground," Frank told him.

Mark was tempted to defend Zack, but he just thanked Frank, who continued with his advice.

"And if Zack tries anything funny, knee him in the goody basket and otherwise kick the crap out of him. Always remember, you're too good for the likes of him." All of that was purely for Zack's benefit since he was now standing nearby talking to Yuka. He turned to give Frank the stink eye. In response, Frank raised his wine glass to him.

After a little mingling, Mark and Zack rejoined each other naturally.

"Since I can't drink anyway, you can go ahead," Mark said seeing that Zack barely sipped his wine. But Zack still didn't drink much. In general, he seemed more subdued. Mark wondered if it was the occasion or the company. Probably Zack couldn't drink and relax and be completely himself with Mia and her guests the way he could with his gay friends.

He did come to life when Mia came over. She had just promised to send Mark and Zack postcards from Spain. Zack gave them his own take on postcards.

"Sending postcards from awesome places is just plain cruel. 'Wish you were here' my ass. What you're really saying is 'Look where I am, and you are not. Up yours, loser.'"

Mark and Mia just stared at him in amazement until he admitted, "You are going to live in Spain. Of course I am jealous. And so is everyone you'll be sending postcards to."

"I like sending postcards. Even more now that I know you hate them," Mia told him.

"I am going to be buried in postcards, aren't I?" Zack grumbled.

"And they will all have Spanish men in Speedos on them," she promised.

"You're a nice lady," Zack said changing his tune on the subject of postcards.

"No. That was to torment you," Mia explained seeing that her ploy would fail. She looked from Zack to Mark like she was wondering where she had gone wrong.

"Nearly naked men are not a good way to torment a gay guy," Mark told her.

"I was thinking of it like, hey, here's a guy you can't have, ha!" she elaborated.

"OK. Now I understand. They will make me deeply sad. Send one every week if you can," Zack said.

Mia groaned seeing the flaw in her plan.

"If I didn't want to look at guys I couldn't have, I would never go on line," Zack told her.

Mark pretended to be embarrassed by his confession.

Mia had moved on to talk to other guests. Zack stood there nursing his drink when he noticed how Mark stood next to him. He felt a shiver, almost a premonition. This is how couples stand next to each other at a party. At that moment, he felt sure that that's what he and Mark would be one day soon. It was a strange moment. Mark was saying goodbye to his past, and Zack was seeing the future.

"I can't believe we won't get to have 4th of July in the good old US of A. What a bummer," Mia had lamented when Mark went over to say goodbye to the whole family the day before they left. The house looked different all packed up. A lot of their stuff was already in storage, the rest was being sold.

They were having burgers and fries in the kitchen. Mia had insisted on American food. Frank was gobbling up his fries before Dorie could steal them. Trying to push away his sadness, Mark picked at his lunch.

"I'm eating his fries," Dorie announced when she saw that Mark was neglecting them.

"I guess from now on my fries will be safe from the French Fry Fiend," Mark said to her.

"If Zack ever lets you have any," Mia told him.

"Let the poor guy have his fries, Dorie," Frank told her, feeling sorry for Mark.

They said their goodbyes and hugged. As he walked by the For Sale sign in the front yard, Mark reminded himself that he wasn't leaving another home. He was going home to Zack and Al.

Mark was making a shopping list and finding out about the 4th of July plans from Zack. Hearing what they were discussing, Al got excited.

"Hot dogs!" Al yelled as he ran through the house to tell PJ the news.

"I would expect him to be more excited about fireworks," Mark said to Zack.

"4th of July is the only time Al is allowed to have hot dogs," Zack explained. Then he noticed the appalled look Mark was giving him. "Don't give me that look. Hot dogs are meat garbage and you know it."

This did not improve Mark's expression.

"Come on. I'm not a food snob. And I'm not depriving Al of his childhood. I just want him to eat healthy while I can still make him," Zack tried to justify himself.

"I didn't say you were ruining his childhood," Mark said.

"You were clearly thinking it."

The plan was to have some barbequed hot dogs and chicken legs in the back yard and go see some fireworks later.

"Today we eat hot dogs and play baseball," Al announced as he and Mark brought lawn chairs and set them up in the back yard.

"Doesn't get more American than that," Zack said.

Mark stared at the grill Zack had just uncovered.

"That's cute," Mark said on seeing it. "When are you going to get a man's grill?"

"I don't need some monster with just me and Al." Zack's excuse only got him a look of scorn from Mark.

"It's not just you guys any more. Now there's a man in the house," Mark told him.

"Shut up and cook," Zack said, but he was smirking at Mark. "If you're not too manly to use the girl grill."

"Don't you ever have people over for a barbeque?" Mark asked

"No. The last thing I want is to stand over a grill cooking meat for a crowd of people."

Mark looked down at the small grill.

"There's no danger of that," he said.

"That's the idea," Zack told him.

First on the agenda was baseball, or some crazy version of baseball. Al wasn't allowed to pitch, but that didn't stop him from throwing when he ended up with the ball. Zack flinched as the ball came flying at his head.

"I don't feel safe here. Al, from now on roll the ball on the ground like we're playing golf. You'll either break my nose or a window."

Al didn't like that but complied. But the rules had been modified in several ways, and things got kind of confusing. As he tried to take a base, Zack found himself immobilized. He looked down to find that Al had wrapped himself around his legs.

"Al, there is no tackling in baseball," Zack told him.

"I know," Al said as he looked up at him, but he made no move to release his father.

"Then let go."

Al shook his head.

Overall, the day was a success. Al had pronounced Mark's hot dogs "extra good". They had gone to watch fireworks afterward in two different places. Al was beside himself with excitement. But the noise sent PJ into hiding. She was under the bed when they got home. Zack and Mark went to put away the lawn chairs and the little barbeque.

"We should do this more often," Mark said.

"I hate standing over a hot grill when it's so hot out," Zack complained.

"I'll do it," Mark offered. He obviously liked grilling and was glad to take over.

Zack looked at him. There was just something so sexy about Mark right then. The words "man of the house" rang in Zack's head. But Zack couldn't just look at him as a man. The more Mark became a part of their lives, the more Zack had to remind himself of how young he was.

Zack was surprised that next weekend Mark was ready to put his words into action. He was getting ready to buy the supplies for another barbeque.

"Can we have burgers?" Mark asked not sure if Zack would let Al have such normal food.

"We can have turkey burgers," Zack said.

"So that's a no on the burgers," Mark interpreted Zack's answer.

"You can have the real thing. Me and Al will have turkey," Zack told him.

"No. I'll have turkey too," Mark said. He wouldn't feel right eating a real burger in front of Al.

Zack mixed the ground turkey according to his own recipe and Mark grilled the burgers. Zack served up the turkey burgers with pride. Mark gave them credit for being good, but not as good as the real thing.

They stayed out in the back yard with Al and PJ even after it got dark. They listened to crickets and watched PJ pounce on unseen things in the grass. Al was reclined on top of Zack, asleep. When Zack couldn't reach his drink without disturbing him, Mark brought it closer then he went to play with PJ. Zack watched him kneeling in the grass testing the cat's reflexes. He then stretched out on the lawn and let PJ climb over him. Zack wanted to ask him if he was happy. He could tell that Mark was relaxed and comfortable. He had been growing more at ease all the time, asserting himself more. He was a man Zack could love forever. Mark turned his head almost like Zack had called out to him. Holding onto PJ, he got up. After putting PJ in the house, he came back for Al. Mark reached down and expertly lifted Al without waking him. As he looked at Mark holding Al, Zack could feel the connection between the three of them. For a second, it was like all the decisions

were in the past. Mark was firmly in their lives with all the doubts resolved. They were a family. But the moment passed. They put Al to bed and let him sleep in his clothes. When they went to sit in the back yard again, Zack thought his feelings would burst out of him.

"Al is worth more than the whole world, isn't he?" Mark said. "He is so small, but he matters more than anything. Nothing else can compare." He was looking up at the sky dotted with stars.

Zack wondered if Mark was reading his mind again. He turned to Zack.

"I noticed when I was holding him. I bet you know what I'm talking about. That bottomless feeling?" Mark seemed to be searching for the right words.

"I know what you mean," Zack told him. "I don't know how to describe it either."

Mark leaned back again and looked up at the stars. He had a serene expression like being understood had calmed some nameless fear. Zack felt calmer too with Mark next to him.

They had barbeque a lot more now that Zack saw that Mark knew his way around a grill and was willing to use it. He made sure he didn't mind and had Mark man the grill pretty much all the time. Mark did roll his eyes at all the grilled vegetables Zack put on to replace the usual barbeque fare.

"A shish kabob should be all meat not all vegetables," Mark complained as he speared chinks of peppers, onions, and even corn sliced from the cob.

"Not in this house," Zack said. Actually the kabob was only mostly vegetables and a few pieces of tender, juicy pork which Mark grilled to perfection. Zack admired his talent as he ate straight off the skewer.

They were done eating. Zack and Mark were relaxing in the lawn chairs. Al was playing or, more accurately, yelling at ants.

"They're not doing what I tell them," Al complained. "I want them to go over the bridge I made."

"You better hope they're not fire ants," Zack said to him.

"What a bunch of dildos," Al said of the ants.

Both Zack and Mark choked on their iced tea.

Mark was the first to find his voice. He used it to defend himself.

"Not me. He did not hear that from me," Mark was quick to say.

Zack called Al over.

"Al, where did you hear that?" Zack asked in a surprisingly cool voice.

After trying to remember for a little bit, all Al said was, "I don't know." Then he wanted to walk away and play with the ants again.

Zack grabbed his t-shirt sleeve.

"No. Hold on. We need to know where you heard that, about the dildos?"

"I told you. I don't know," Al said a little peevish now.

"Well, think," Zack urged him.

"I don't know," Al said even more annoyed now. "What am I, chopped liver?"

Zack chuckled but then forced himself to get serious again.

"Oh, no," he told Al. "We need to know about the dildos. Don't try to distract us with your chopped liver shtick."

"What?" Al asked, completely confused. He looked from his father to Mark for an explanation. But all Mark could do was laugh.

In the end Zack didn’t get any answers, but of course, he blamed the kids at Little Rainbow. Mark had a different theory.

"Are you sure you didn’t say that?"

"I did not! Probably."

But only a few days later, there it was again. While Zack and Mark were lingering over dinner, Al was off in the living room with the cat. PJ wasn’t cooperating in whatever game Al wanted her to play. Zack heard Al say, "PJ, don't be a dildo."

"Why is he still saying that?" Zack said in alarm.

"Because you never told him not to," Mark reminded him. "You only asked him where he heard it."

"It was implied. He can’t be saying that. Everyone will think he heard it at home and that I'm some kind of dildo freak. And I'm not," he added for Mark's benefit.

Mark went off to tell Al not to talk about dildos and explain to him why not without giving him any information on the subject.

Chapter 16

Since Zack had a Saturday dentist appointment, Mark filled him in on what he and Al would be doing.

"I thought we could go to the farmers' market. But we can wait till you get back or go tomorrow," Mark said.

Zack made a face as Mark made his suggestion.

"The farmers' market. You know, that place where they sell the fruits and vegetables that you insist we eat," Mark reminded him.

"I'm not making you eat anything," Zack said to try and defend himself. "Don't make me sound like some kind of vegetable tyrant."

When Zack got back Al greeted him at the door excitedly.

"Look! Kumquats!" Al presented him with two of them in his cupped hands.

"Where did you get those?"

"We went to the farmers' market," Al said. "They look like tiny oranges but you eat them with the skin on," Al explained. Then he demonstrated by biting into one.

"I thought you only liked big fruit," Zack said as he went into the kitchen where Mark was still unpacking everything they had bought.

"Tell him not to stereotype you," Mark instructed Al.

"Dad, don't stereotype me," Al commanded with his mouth full of kumquat bits.

"OK." Zack gave Mark a dirty look for feeding Al his lines.

"Don't give any kumquats to PJ," Mark warned as Al went off in search of the cat.

"What are you doing to me?" Zack asked.

"You love it. Al is crazy about the fruits and vegetables we got," Mark said.

"I mean about siding with Al against me," Zack said.

"You love that too. You have free reign to tease him knowing I'll yank your leash when you need it," Mark said.

"Mark, I'm not into that," Zack said provocatively and gave him a really dirty look. Mark reddened instantly and looked at Zack like it was all his fault.

"Hey, you chose your own words. This one is on you," Zack told him.

Mark couldn't keep a smile off his face so he looked away. Just as well, Zack was thinking too much about kissing him, and his brain kept saying, "Why not?" He was relieved when Mark walked away to deal with the mountain of food he and Al had bought.

Next time Zack came across Mark and Al in the kitchen, it was after lunch. They were busy with the blender and fruit, but the subject of their conversation was broccoli.

"You could just have one bite to try. They look like little trees," Mark was saying.

"Mark, people don't eat trees," Al told him in all seriousness.

Mark looked at Zack accusingly. It was his theory that the only reason Al wouldn't even try broccoli was because Zack had been using it as a weapon. Zack didn't deny this.

"Raising a kid is not all touchy feely crap. It's war. You just remember whose side you're on," he had told Mark then. Now he accepted responsibility for Al's stubbornness with an apologetic shrug.

Mark sighed and turned on the blender. They each got a glass of fruit smoothy to drink. Zack watched Mark lick some of the fruit drink off his lips. As Zack kept staring, unable to pull his eyes away from Mark, he noticed that Mark stared back at him. Al broke the spell by announcing loudly that he was done. He handed his glass to Mark, but Zack volunteered to clean up. Since Mark wouldn't let him, they did it together. Zack thought how easy it would be for them to start making out now. With Al gone to play, they had a little privacy. Zack could run his hands under Mark's t-shirt and over his muscled chest. He

could feel up Mark's ass through the jeans. Then they could duck into the bathroom for some quick but thorough satisfaction. But that would only be possible if they were together as a couple. They could touch and kiss whenever they wanted and do more when Al was out of sight. And to make it happen, all Zack had to do was tell Mark how he felt. He had a feeling Mark would say yes. The answer was already in his beautiful, dark eyes. Not knowing if their relationship would last, Zack couldn't do it.

For a moment Zack stood at the sink, hands soapy and wet feeling a wave of regret wash over him like a tidal wave. He closed his eyes and focused on Al. Al deserved a calm, stable childhood with no upheaval. And by bringing Mark into their lives, Zack had done something wonderful. That would have to be enough.

Since they worked so well together, Zack decided they should team up to make dinner. Mark planned to make macaroni and cheese for dinner, which according to Zack was made with carrots and peas as well as the usual ingredients. Al objected though.

"Cory said macaroni and cheese doesn't have any vegetables." Cory, of course, was one of the Little Rainbow kids.

"Yes, it does," Zack insisted.

"He said it's not supposed to. He said you're tricking me," Al said with a frown.

"Would I do that?" Zack asked foolishly.

"Yes."

Zack tried again.

"Would Mark do that?"

"Yes."

"Well tell Cory that if he knows so much, he should open his own restaurant."

Al thought about it for a minute.

"Can I do that? I want Jojo's to be my restaurant. But all the food has to be big like in the pictures, no little food, not any," Al said very fast

as if the opening of his restaurant was going to happen any minute.

"Big broccoli too?" Zack asked to be a wet blanket.

"No big broccoli!" Al objected.

"But it's in the picture."

"No broccoli! It’s my restaurant."

Mark stared at Zack, who shrugged.

Looking at how the so called "macaroni and cheese" turned out, Mark said, "Al is right. That’s not macaroni and cheese."

"Let’s throw some bacon on it then," Zack proposed sarcastically.

"We don’t even have any bacon in the house," Mark reminded him.

"Bacon is a time bomb. It’s like having a bag of potato chips in the house. Sooner or later, you have a weak moment, and you rip its clothes off." Zack covered his face as soon as the words left his mouth. He was going to say "rip into the bag", but the words got garbled by his Mark obsessed brain. He knew his face must be bright red. He knew Mark must be giving him a prize winning look. "You know what I meant," Zack blurted out.

"Do I?" Mark asked significantly.

Zack groaned. He wanted to tear his tongue out and stomp on it. But it wasn’t exactly a shock for either of them. It was just the truth slipping out. Mark was too tempting. Zack didn’t know how long he could resist him.

Chapter 17

Mark had his cell phone on even in class but with the ringer silent. It wasn't actually allowed, but it made him nervous not to be reachable. He noticed the call from Suzie at Little Rainbow and left class to answer it. Al was being taken to the emergency room. He had fallen and hurt his wrist. Zack had been notified and was on his way to the hospital. Mark rushed to the hospital too. He got another phone call on the way. That's why he waited for Zack outside the doors to the emergency room instead of staying with Al.

"Did you see him?" Zack demanded immediately before Mark could tell him anything. His eyes were wild with panic.

"Yes. They took x-rays. Suzie said it's not broken."

"Is she a doctor? Are you?" Zack asked angrily.

"You need to stay calm. The doctor told Suzie..."

"Don't..." he was shouting again, but Mark cut him off.

"You need to stay calm for Al so he knows he can count on you." Mark spoke slowly in a slightly raised voice.

"Don't lecture me right now," Zack said through gritted teeth.

"Now is when it counts."

"His mother. Her arm was broken when..."

"Stop! That has nothing to do with this. Focus on Al."

Zack had been blind with fear. He didn't know how he managed to drive himself to the hospital. He had no idea where he had parked. He saw Mark and latched onto him. Hearing that Al hurt his arm, he made a connection with what happened to Kelly when she was the same age. Of course this had nothing to do with Kelly's broken arm, but it seemed like an omen.

"It's only a sprain," Mark told him. Though he was sure on that point, Mark also looked bewildered by Zack's craziness. It was like Zack's

meltdown was too much for him to handle. But then he was sure of himself again and leading Zack through the hospital corridors.

"You don't have to be calm. Just pretend to be calm. OK?" Mark was now holding his arm as they neared the examining room where Al was. He turned Zack and held him by the shoulders. "Take that look off your face," Mark ordered him.

"I don't like it," they heard from inside. It was Al. Zack was ready to rush in there, but Mark didn't let him go. He put his hand to Zack's face and touched his forehead to Zack's just like he had done with Al when he climbed the bookcase. He whispered, "That was Al. He's OK."

That was true. Al was complaining, like he always did. He wasn't in any kind of distress. Zack nearly cried with relief then smiled. Mark let him go. He signaled for Zack to wait then went in ahead of him. He said a few words then he and Suzie came out. Suzie looked at Zack, but he didn't want to talk to her until he saw Al.

"What's all the fuss in here?" Zack asked as he went in.

"Daddy!" Al said and burst into tears threatening to make his father cry too. Al stretched out one arm to him. The other one was still being attended to by the nurse. Zack sat next to Al on the examining table and put his arm around him.

"What happened here?" Zack asked seeing that his wrist was wrapped to immobilize it.

"It's a sprain. Not too bad. The doctor will come by to talk to you," the nurse said then Al took over with his own version.

"I was trying to do a hand stand. Jamie can do it. I wanted to do it too. Miss Suzie said we weren't allowed. I did it anyway, then I fell. It hurt a lot."

"Aww. Does it hurt now?" Zack asked.

"Yes," Al said but in a pouty way that demanded sympathy and meant he wasn't in too much pain. "And I want the one with the dogs, but she won't let me have it."

"Oh," Zack saw what he meant. The nurse was wrapping his wrist with a contraption that had cupcakes on it. "You like cupcakes."

"I want that one," Al said pointing to a different one that had dogs on

it.

"Sorry," the nurse said. "That one is too big for you, honey."

"Broccoli," Al said gruffly.

The nurse looked confused, but Zack didn't explain. He praised Al for being good and brave and scolded him for disobeying Miss Suzie. When Zack gave him a hug, he was careful of his arm.

"Mark gave me half of a hug too," Al told him since what he got certainly wasn't the full hug that Zack wanted to give him.

"That's good. Put them together, and you'll have a whole hug." Zack was so glad that Mark had been there to hug Al before Zack could get to the hospital.

The doctor came by as promised. She wanted to show him Al's x rays, but Zack told her he couldn't look at them. The thought of those little bones made visible, he couldn't take it. But the doctor had mostly good news. The sprain wasn't bad at all. The wrapping was more a precaution than anything, If it had been an adult with the same sprain, it wouldn't have even been necessary. She said it could probably come off in a week if he didn't reinjure it. Zack again got the feeling that he might cry but held it back. He hurried off to join Mark and Al.

They both had their heads bent over Al's wrist as Zack approached. They were talking about giant cupcakes. Zack looked at them while they still didn't know he was there. Mark had a very natural way of speaking with Al. He wondered how today would have gone if Mark hadn't been there. Would Zack have barged in and frightened Al? Yelled at Suzie? He didn't know. Good thing Mark was there so he didn't have to find out. Zack took a minute to get himself together. He hated that he had been so difficult when he arrived, that Mark had to work so hard to calm him down. But he also worried that Mark might think less of him now.

It wasn't until Al was in bed that night that Zack got a chance to talk to Mark.

"Thank you for what you did. And I'm sorry I was so crazy."

"Anyone would be," Mark said. "I did have prior warning. George called me to warn me after you left the office. He wanted to know

what was happening. He said you were inarticulate before you ran out of there. I explained, and he said when you arrived I would be dealing with a crazy man. 'You won't even recognize him as the Zack you know.' That's what he said. He told me I would need to handle you."

"Oh God," Zack said feeling even more embarrassed.

"I guess he knows you," Mark said with a shrug since everything George had told him proved to be right on the nose.

"Yeah. He's seen me in action. Al had a stomach ache when we went over to George's father's place for a barbeque slash wedding slash retirement party for his father. Al was throwing up a little too much, probably something he ate, and I went crazy."

"Did you blame George?" Mark wanted to know.

"No. Al was a little iffy when we arrive. I thought it was because he was car sick. It was a long, winding drive. We saw more cows than gas stations. George's father lives in the middle of nowhere in this crazy house George designed for him. It won't surprise you to find out that George's father is quite a character. Anyway, Al didn't want to eat anything from the very start. Lucky for George and his father considering what a lunatic I was. I was going crazy thinking how far the nearest hospital was, how long it would take an ambulance to get there. Meanwhile, Al threw up a few times, took a nap, and he was fine. I was a disgrace."

"I'm sure you were forgiven," Mark said then he was thoughtful. "The drive to the hospital was scary. I knew it was just his wrist, but until I saw him... That's when I called him my baby, and he told me he wasn't a baby so I knew he was OK."

"That's my boy," Zack praised Al. He was proud of him and grateful that Mark had been there. And now he was grateful to have Mark next to him. He couldn't imagine sitting there, alone in the dark thinking about Al being hurt. It meant everything to have Mark with him. And the moment made something crystal clear. This was why he never made a move on Mark. Mark was here for Al. He was Zack's backup, his second in command, his anchor. No matter how much he wanted him, it wasn't worth the risk of losing someone who could keep him steady and keep Al safe.

Chapter 18

Al’s wrist healed with no trouble, but Zack noticed that Mark was even more watchful. It was after dinner when Al came over to Mark where he was studying on the couch. He had his finger in his mouth. Zack was on the phone so he let Mark deal with him for now.

"My tooth is wiggly," Al said then he demonstrated by wiggling the tooth sickeningly.

To distract him from playing with his tooth, Mark decided on another activity.

"I know. Let’s do a wiggly dance," Mark proposed. And that’s exactly what they did.

"We're dancing," Al said to Zack. Mark turned and saw Zack watching them. He didn’t hide his amusement so Mark stopped dancing.

Zack was off the phone now. Seeing he was free, Al came over to him.

"You dance too," Al demanded. He took his hands and moved them back and forth in what he believed was a dance move.

Now Mark was smirking at him.

"Don't smirk at me, I saw that butt wiggle you were doing," Zack said.

Al did his own version of the butt wiggle. Zack handed Mark his phone.

"Here. Get some video of this. I'll blackmail him with it when he gets older."

"I thought I was capturing precious childhood memories not blackmail material," Mark said as he recorded the dancing.

"They're the same thing. There used to be this picture of me in the bath when I was two. When I was 11, I sneaked it out of the photo album and I ripped it up," Zack said. "I have no regrets about that bit of vandalism."

Zack grabbed the phone from Mark and got some video of him

dancing with Al. He imagined looking at it years from not when Mark would be gone, moved on with his life, no longer in his. He felt a pang of anguish. He couldn't let that happen. It could be him and Mark looking at the video, laughing at each other's moves. They could be happy. They could be a family. He just didn't know how long Mark would want that, or if he was even old enough to know.

They got plenty of their crazy dancing on video. Even PJ got in on the action. Afterward, Zack went to put the video on his computer. Mark came along to see some of their old videos. Zack sat at his desk, and Mark stood close behind him.

"Hey look at these. That's monster Al. This was when he was three. Whenever I tried to get him on video, he attacked me like I was some kind of paparazzo or something. Look, he's like some kind of giant monster," Zack said when Al loomed large as he got too close to the lens.

"Alzilla?" Mark suggested.

Next Zack showed him videos of Al demolishing his birthday cakes.

"This is him digging through his first birthday cake. I had to hose him down afterward. I don't think he actually got any into his mouth. That's Louise. This is his second birthday, most of his cake ended up in his hair and down his shirt. That's Louisa again."

"You're not letting me see," Mark complained because Zack was only showing him a little bit of a video then switching to another one.

"I don't want to bore you."

"Is that what I think it is?" Mark asked having spotted the folder marked Blackmail Material."

"Yup. And it's password protected," Zack confirmed with no shame.

"Are you kidding? From who?"

"Al. Some day soon, and definitely before I expect it, Al will know more about computers than I do. I want to keep him out of there," Zack said. Then seeing how Mark looked at him, he added, "What? I am not paranoid. I told you how I ripped up that picture of me in the bath."

As Zack clicked through the videos, Mark had to lean over him a little to get a good look. Zack inhaled slowly feeling guilty that he was taking advantage of this opportunity to sniff Mark. Zack could feel the warmth radiating from his body. Feeling it only made Zack hot. So close, Zack would hardly even need to move to touch him, to reach up his hand to cup his face, to circle his waist with his arm to pull him into his lap.

Zack forced himself to focus and showed a video with Louise in it.

"That's the last one before she left," Zack said. It was from when they went on a picnic. There was a big checkered tablecloth blowing away in the wind. Al was delighted. He couldn't stop laughing as Louise tried frantically to keep it down, and Zack filmed her instead of helping. Al giggled non stop.

"How did Louise ever manage to leave while looking at Al?" Mark wondered. He was looking at two year old Al laughing uncontrollably.

"It helped that she had a hot guy waiting for her," Zack said.

"So when I have a hot guy waiting..." Mark had said jokingly, but Zack had felt horrified and stricken. He had to turn away. Mark noticed.

"I'm not going anywhere yet," Mark reassured him. He even rested his hand on Zack's shoulder for a second.

Among the videos, Mark saw a folder with Kelly's name on it.

"Do you have videos of Al's mom?" he asked.

Zack shook his head sadly. All the home movies his father had made after marrying Anne were at the house when she died and then who knows where they ended up. And Kelly wouldn't let him take any videos of her when she was sick.

"Al doesn't need to see Cancer Mom," she said. Then she seemed to consider her fate. "Of all the things that could have killed me. Cancer. And now." She pointed at Al sleeping in his crib. "Not before when it wouldn't have made any difference."

Zack had to correct her.

"It would have always made a difference."

"Not like now. Now it makes a huge difference."

Zack had to agree with that. After she was gone, that baby would be left only with him as a poor substitute. Zack felt like he would never be equal to what the kid needed. But he would do his best for him and hope that Al had inherited Kelly's spirit to make up the difference.

When he told Mark this, he said, "You did fine."

"My paternal instinct kicked in, and I had Louise," Zack said. Then he went on to explain why there was no video of Kelly. "I thought we should have some video of her for Al, but she nixed that idea. So all I have are these." Zack opened the folder. All the files in it were audio. "She talks about my father in a lot of them. So it's a double whammy for me if I dare to listen. We recorded them over her last few weeks but only while she sounded OK. She didn't want Al to only know her as some sickly woman. She even told me that if she didn't need me to take Al, she wouldn't have let me see her like that either. And I couldn’t even get mad at her when she said that."

Zack clicked on the first recording.

"Al, this is your mother speaking," Kelly started off in a deep, serious voice.

Then Zack could hear his own voice, sounding strange, of course.

"I thought you didn't want to scare him."

Then he could hear Kelly again, speaking in her normal voice now, only a little weaker because of her condition.

"Ok, here's some motherly advice. Remember these words of wisdom. You must always give Zack a hard time," she said.

"Great. Thanks.".

"Ok, what else? Oh, always wear a condom," she said.

"Hey, I want to be able to play this for him when he's little. Start with the G rated stuff and work your way up to sexually transmitted diseases," Zack told her.

When Zack looked up and over his shoulder, Mark was smiling.

"She isn’t how I thought she would be," he told Zack.

"You thought she would be nice and sweet," Zack guessed. "It's those big, brown eyes."

"I should have known she would be like that." Mark turned his eyes to Zack. "That's why Al is always getting the better of you, isn't it?"

"Hey!" Zack protested. "And yes. She always got me. I can barely keep up with Al now. When he gets older, he'll demolish me."

Mark laughed at Zack's self pity.

"Then why are you always teasing Al? You shouldn't have started a war you couldn't win," Mark admonished him.

"He was just a baby when I started. I thought I had the advantage. That's why you have to stick around and be on my side."

"You are living in some dream world where I stay with you and Al forever," Mark said snapping Zack out of his joking mood.

It sounded like Mark hadn't meant to say that. It just slipped out. That didn't mean that Zack was going to disregard it. Obviously, the question of how long Mark would be living with them was on both their minds, and Al's too.

"I know you won't be here forever," he said thinking that Mark might be bristling at the expectation and the constraint. But then he noticed that wasn't it. He turned to Mark more fully. "You know this isn't some summer job. You are going to be staying with us at least until you finish college."

Mark looked confused.

"Sorry. I should have mentioned that before," Zack said.

"No. I..."

"I'm sorry. I should have made sure that you knew that you have a home with us. Even if you decide on graduate school," he added trying to regain a lighter mood.

Mark smiled. He looked sad and happy at the same time.

Chapter 19

Mark liked hearing from Zack that he wanted him to live with them until he finished college. He did warn him that since he went only part time that might take even longer.

"The longer the better," Zack had said.

Though he wanted so much more from him, his body for one, Mark still liked hearing that Zack wanted him to stay. It made him feel more secure.

He noticed that he had a different feeling about the house than he did at first. Mark felt it most when he was leaving and when he was arriving back. When he was on his way out, he would leave knowing that this was his home, where he would come back to. It wasn't just a knowledge, it went deeper than that. He had a home.

He and Al were about to leave. Mark had all his stuff for class, and Al was ready for Little Rainbow. When it was time to go, for some reason, Al was holding PJ and heading for the door. Mark stopped him to find out why. Al wanted to take her for Show And Tell, and no amount of convincing would get him to give up the idea. Reasoning with him didn't work. Obviously the little dude thought he had figured out a loophole that would let him take PJ to Little Rainbow, and he wasn't going to give up easily. Mark tried putting his foot down, but Al only said, "If PJ can't go, I'm not going."

Mark tried telling him that he would miss his class at the college if Al didn't listen to him, but Al didn't care. Mark decided to call Suzie and have her tell Al that he couldn't take PJ to Little Rainbow. He tried giving the phone to Al.

"Here, Miss Suzie wants to talk to you."

"I don't believe you," Al said, and he wouldn't take it.

"He won't take the phone. I'll put you on speaker."

Now Suzie's voice came from Mark's cellphone.

"I'm sorry, Al, but you have to leave PJ at home," Suzie told him

kindly but clearly.

Al ran out of the room with PJ in his arms.

"He ran off. Thanks anyway," he said to Suzie as he hung up and went chasing after Al.

"Did you hear what Miss Suzie said?" Mark asked once he caught up with Al in his room.

"That wasn't her. You're trying to trick me," Al said. He tried to climb on his bed without letting go of PJ. But PJ squirmed, and Al couldn't hold on to her. As soon as Al let her go, all the commotion sent PJ scurrying under Al's bed. Al went after her and then he didn't come out. Mark tried talking to him some more, even guilting him by telling him he would fail his class, but Al stayed put.

Mark hated to do it, but he called Zack.

"Do you know how to get Al out from under the bed?" Mark said.

"A broom?" Zack joked.

"I have to get to class, and he refuses to go to Little Rainbow without PJ. He wants her for Show And Tell. I already called Suzie so she could tell him it wasn't allowed. It didn't work."

Zack took only a second to think about it.

"Bribe him. Since you have to go to class, promise him anything. I'll veto it when I get home on the grounds that it was obtained under duress," he said decisively.

Mark wasn't so sure about that plan, but he went ahead with it anyway.

After Zack picked up Al at Little Rainbow, he didn't say anything just drove for a while.

"So were you good today?" he finally asked.

"Aha."

"And when I ask Mark if you were good today, what is he going to say?"

Al didn't answer, and Zack didn't press him. It would have to wait till Mark got home.

When he heard Mark's key in the door, Al ran right up to him. Zack could hear Al trying to convince Mark not to rat him out.

"Do you want to tell your dad what happened yourself?" Mark asked.

There was no answer. Maybe Al shook his head.

"I'm going to go talk to your dad now. You want to come with me?"

No answer again, and when Mark came into the kitchen Al wasn't with him.

"I couldn't get a confession out of him," Zack told him.

"I tried to have him tell you, but he won't."

"What did you promise?" Zack asked. He hoped it was something really good.

"To talk to you about getting a dog," Mark said.

"Just talk?"

Mark nodded.

"Nice." Zack said with a smile of approval.

"What's the punishment?" Mark asked looking worried about what Zack would come up with.

"No dog."

"That's the punishment? So the dog you never had any intention of getting him..." Mark started saying.

"Is the perfect punishment," Zack finished for him.

"You're twisted."

"You get to tell him."

"Why?" Mark grumbled.

"He disobeyed you."

"Fine. I'll go make your son unhappy," Mark said and went to let Al know how badly he had screwed up.

Zack hated to send him off to be the bad guy. Though he wasn't eager to do it, Mark knew Zack was right and that it had to be done. He just preferred to be on Al's side all the time. Zack could already see Al's disappointed face when Mark told him there would be no dog. Maybe it wasn't fair to punish him that way, but Al had to know that disobeying Mark had serious consequences. Al would also have to write a big "Sorry Mark". And undoubtedly Al will add an incomprehensible drawing.

The mail had arrived and Zack held up a piece of it for Mark to see.

"Mark, what am I looking at?"

Mark only laughed. He looked at the back to confirm what he suspected. It was from Spain, and it said "Wish you were here". On the front of it was a picture of a cat in a straw hat.

"A cat. Not a naked man. Not even some Spanish scenery. A cat. Of which I already have one," Zack bitched.

"She was going to send you naked men, but you ruined it. So it's your own fault for pointing out the flaw in her plan."

"I'm like a supervillain. I don't know when to shut up," Zack admitted.

"I think Mia is the supervillain. But she's good at it."

"Let's see yours," Zack demanded. At first he couldn't tell what it was as Mark held it up. Then he realized it wasn't a bought post card. It was made from a real photo.

"It's a sandcastle Dorie built, only the tide came in and demolished half of it."

"We have to take Al to the beach," Zack said thinking of his own kid building sand castles and demolishing them.

That same week there was another important piece of mail.

"Miss Olga invited us! Miss Olga invited us!" Al was running and yelling and waving around an invitation card.

"She came by and personally delivered the invitation for all three of us," Mark explained. "She's having a piano recital for her students."

"Oh, God," Zack said not hiding how horrified he was.

"She said, ‘I hope this young man owns a suit.' She was talking about Al. I told her, 'He might, but I don't.'"

"You were hoping she would let you off the hook," Zack guessed.

"I only wanted her to let me off the hook about the suit, not uninvite me. She said, 'Then it's about time you got one.'"

Zack laughed. That was typical Miss Olga.

"Al doesn't have one either. We can go suit shopping."

"I thought you hated shopping with Al," Mark reminded him.

"But I like shopping with you and Al. It’ll be fun."

Mark was happy to go with Zack and Al to the mall or anywhere. They ate mall food and tried on suits. Zack took a million pictures of Al in different little suits. He took some of Mark too, but restrained himself. Even so, Mark had to warn him, "You’re embarrassing me."

Zack got a new suit for himself, a gray one, of course. He also tried to pay for Mark’s suit, shirt and tie, as well the shoes Mark had to buy to go with his new clothes. Though Zack pouted about it, Mark wouldn’t let him pay. Mark took pictures of him and Al in their suits. They took more pictures when they got ready to go to Miss Olga’s. One in particular stood out in Mark’s mind. Stretching his arm out as far as it would go, Zack took a picture of him and Mark dressed up in their new suits. Looking at it, Mark thought it was too much like the pictures of just married gay couples he had seen. Mark was turned toward Zack and smiling in embarrassment while Zack was beaming with his arm around him. It was a picture of happiness. But not of a lifetime, only the happiness of a moment. Still Mark couldn’t stop looking at it. It represented everything he wanted. Zack looked at it strangely too. Then their eyes met, and each of them seemed to be asking the other a question. "When you look at this picture, do you see what I see?"

Chapter 20

Roy was back in town. Mark ignored the first few messages he sent then answered the next ones briefly. Though Roy hadn't yet asked to meet him, he would. Mark didn't know how he would respond.

Just as Mark looked at another message from Roy, Zack brushed against his elbow at the kitchen sink. Mark flinched away.

"I'm sorry," Zack said seeing his reaction.

"No. I'm just tense," Mark said to try and excuse his uncalled for reaction. And that was the truth as far as it went. Not knowing what he would say to Roy did stress him out.

"Am I making you tense? I mean, am I being too demanding?" Zack asked him worriedly and sweetly.

"No. Not at all. I'm just not sure about this last test. It's no big deal," Mark lied and hated himself for it. Zack was looking at him with those blue eyes filled with concern, and Mark just wanted to spill everything to him. But his insides tightened at the thought of telling Zack about Roy.

Unfortunately that wasn't the end of it. There were more lies when Roy called asking to see Mark. Zack overheard him on the phone. Mark was telling Roy, "I can't leave right now. I just can't. This is a job."

Once he was off the phone, Zack talked to him about it.

"You have evenings off. If you're seeing someone..."

"I'm not seeing anyone." As Mark said those words, he didn't know if it was a lie or the truth. He just knew he couldn't avoid Roy forever. He had to settle things with him.

Though he didn't know what to do about Roy, Mark did know that he wanted someone very different from him. He wanted someone who wasn't ashamed or lying about who he was, someone who knew himself and was proud of his own identity. Most of all, Mark wanted

someone who knew who he loved and knew how to treat them and how to hold on to them. As Mark thought about that ideal man, he tried not to think of Zack. That list wasn't about Zack. That list was about some other guy who was exactly like Zack in every way.

Whoever the ideal man was, he was the opposite of Roy. Roy wasn't gay. It was all Mark's doing. That was the official story, maybe it was even the story Roy believed. But the truth was, years ago, Roy made the first move. And Mark in his naiveté and foolishness believed that what they did together meant something. For a long time, Mark thought that some day the denial would come to an end and that Roy would wake up. But it was Mark who woke up to the truth. He knew it without a doubt when they were discovered together in his bed. That was his moment of real disillusionment with Roy. Rather than admit the truth, Roy went along with the official version and let Mark take all the blame.

Mark felt like a coward avoiding Roy so he agreed to meet him. This time it was Mark who suggested their rock as the meeting place.

It was a warm evening with the sun low on the horizon. The view was beautiful, ruddy in the background with the greens of the treetops crowded together under the sky. Mark listened to the sounds of birds and insects. He also listened for the sounds of Roy's approach. He would have to park a few minutes away, so he would arrive on foot whether he drove or not. Mark remembered how once he had felt excited as he waited for Roy to appear. Now he dreaded his approach. But there it was anyway. He heard the sounds of Roy's footsteps as he came up to Mark.

Right away, Roy could tell that something was different. He grabbed Mark like he wanted to crush him, seeking proof that everything was the same between them. But the reassurance just wasn't there. Mark's body was cold to him.

"I guess this new job is keeping you busy," Roy said loosening his hold on Mark. He searched his face like the real answer was there and not in his words.

"It is. It's not like the last one." Mark was speaking mostly the truth, but Roy already knew something was off.

"This thing between us is worth making time for. It goes deeper than anything. It's sacred, man," Roy claimed.

As he looked away from Roy, Mark wondered if that was ever true. He already suspected that what little they had now was just a remnant of something that might not have been real in the first place. After all, it was all built on the lies they told themselves. Roy saying he wasn't gay. Mark convincing himself that Roy cared.

When Mark didn't say anything, Roy moved to hold him again. The only thing he could do for Mark now was purely physical. Mark considered what that would mean. Zack had gotten him all worked up, and now Roy would take care of those needs if Mark let him. But the truth was, Roy was a very poor substitute for Zack. His touch felt wrong, and Mark had to push him away. Roy tried again, more hesitantly this time.

"I think our time is over," Mark said to Roy "We need to grow up."

"No. It's not over. This is us. Our place. This thing we share..." Roy started to say in a voice tightening with emotion.

"Whatever this was, it's finished," Mark told him. He wanted to say he still cared about Roy, but he didn't want to confuse things. He had to act even more sure than he felt so Roy would know he meant it.

Roy stared at him hard. Mark almost felt pinned in place by guilt, by Roy's need for him, but he met Roy's eyes as coolly as he could. Roy looked angry and hurt but not surprised then he walked away from him.

Mark still leaned against their rock. It had been warmed by the sun, but it was now cooling. All around him colors were deepening as the sun set. Mark waited for a while like he was absorbing the place, not sure if he would ever come there again.

As he drove home, Mark wondered about his future. When he thought hard about it, he realized it wasn't just Roy that Mark didn't want. These days when he saw a good looking guy, even one who seemed interested, Mark didn't want him. Before, he would have smiled, gone over, maybe arranged to meet, or ducked into a quiet spot to make out. Now he looked away from guys who sent him signals. Without even giving them a chance, he knew they would only be a disappointment. He was horny and unsatisfied, but he only allowed himself the touch of his own hand. Mark wondered if anyone could ever satisfy him now except for Zack.

Mark couldn't help thinking about what it would be like to be with

him. A relationship with Zack would be nothing like the cheap mess he and Roy once had, he was sure of that. He knew sex with Zack would be on another level. Even Zack's casual touch had a sure, gentle quality. He imagined a touch like that on his cock and everywhere else. Even as he thought about Zack and felt his touch lingering, caressing, Mark knew it was pointless. Though he had noticed Zack respond to him, look at him like he was telling him yes, it didn't mean anything. It was just a symptom of too much time spent in close proximity. Zack would never want to become involved with him.

From the beginning, Zack had tried not to obsess over Mark, and not just his physical beauty. He had to tell himself not to pay so much attention to his moods, expressions, the sound of his voice. It was no use. So Zack couldn't help but notice that Mark had been a little strange recently. Since Mark didn't want to talk about it, Zack resolved to put it out of his mind.

It was no good, just another useless resolution about Mark. Zack could never keep his mind off him. And now that he suspected he might be seeing someone, there was no chance in hell that his obsession wouldn't kick into high gear.

Based on what he had overheard, Zack believed that Mark was involved in a difficult relationship, not a happy one. And Mark certainly wasn't spending a lot of time with this guy, not the way he would if he was in love. Though he had expected to be jealous, Zack found that he wasn't nearly as much as he thought he would be. Zack felt a rare sense of certainty about the situation. If he wanted to, Zack could take Mark away from this guy, whoever he was. Zack wanted to laugh at himself for his egotism. Who the hell did he think he was? But the certainty remained. And its source wasn't Zack himself. It was Mark. When he looked at Mark or just felt him near, Zack knew that something flowed between them, and it wasn't one sided. He knew that if he reached out his hand, Mark would take it.

Zack was on his way back from dinner with Owen. The dinner was mostly Owen texting with some guy he was currently crazy about. After unsuccessfully trying to grab the phone away from him, Zack retaliated by calling Leon so he could get the dirt on Owen's new boy toy while sitting right across from Owen. That got his attention. He spent the rest of dinner telling Zack way more about this guy than he ever wanted to know. Owen was a lot more fun when he was sleeping around and uninvolved. That's when he told the good stories. If he

had known Owen was in the middle of the honeymoon phase, Zack would have agreed to coffee or a quick lunch but not dinner with him.

As Zack pulled up in front of his house, ready to take the turn into his driveway, he noticed a car parked on the street. Next he noticed a young guy walking right up his driveway. He was good looking, not very tall with a powerful built of a quarterback not a linebacker. His clothes weren't tight, but he had the kind of physique that makes itself noticed regardless. Zack appreciated what he was looking at in a detached way, the way he looked at guys on the computer screen or in a magazine. Mainly he wondered what this guy had to do with him and his house. He wasn't surprised when Mark came out to meet him. Though he clearly knew him, Mark wasn't exactly happy to see this guy.

Zack parked in the driveway without being noticed by the visitor though Mark must have seen him. At first Zack couldn't hear what the newcomer said. As he stepped out of the car, he heard Mark say, "What are you doing here?"

"Where else would I be? It's still summer break you know. Did you say come in? Don't mind if I do," the guy said, but he made no move to go inside. Not that he could have. The front door was closed, of course, and Mark was blocking the way.

"Roy, what the hell are you doing here?" Mark asked, his anger rising a little at the non answer his friend was giving him.

"We're still friends, aren't we? I just came to check out your new living arrangement," Roy answered more seriously this time. There was also a suggestive twist to his words.

Though Zack couldn't be sure, he thought the answer to why he was there was pretty close to the truth. But it didn't matter because Mark's question had only been a way to let this guy know that he wasn't welcome. Zack hung back throughout their exchange, still unnoticed by this Roy.

"You can't ever come here again. Do you hear me?" Mark told him.

But evidently Roy didn't hear.

"So you're living with some gay guy now? At least that's what I hear," he said.

Mark didn't address his curiosity about his new life.

"You need to leave," was all Mark said.

"Come on. Let me see your room," the guy pleaded.

"Roy, you need to leave!"

"Is there a room, Mark?"

"Go home."

Zack now approached the two of them.

"This is my employer," Mark said to his friend sharply, as a warning.

The guy turned and looked Zack over quickly. He stretched out his hand and said, "Hi, I'm..."

Instead of shaking his hand, Zack cut him off before he finished introducing himself.

"Did Mark ask you to do something?" he paused as the guy withdrew his hand. "If you can't do as Mark asks you to do, then I don't want to know you."

Zack stared hard at him then started toward the front door. As he stepped past him, Mark gave him a cautious look. But mainly he looked determined. Zack went inside leaving Mark to handle his friend.

Through the closed door, he could hear Mark saying, "You will not cost me this job." He said it harshly, and Zack allowed himself a grim smile at his tone.

First Zack went to check on Al. He was arranging his toys on the edge of his bed and telling PJ that they were lined up by rank. He was oblivious to what was happening in front of the house.

Though he was waiting for Mark, Zack didn't want it to look that way. He went into the kitchen and got out a bottle of mineral water and a glass. He knew Mark would come to find him when he was done. As Zack waited for Mark to come in, he wondered if aggressive, athletic looking guys like this one were Mark's type.

When Mark finally came in, he only stood in front of him and looked at him. Zack didn't know why, but he smiled at him. Zack got another glass and poured out some mineral water for Mark too. They sat down at the kitchen table.

"So you are seeing someone," Zack said to start things off.

Mark shook his head.

"That sure sounded like a jealous boyfriend to me," Zack pointed out.

"He isn't my boyfriend."

"He's someone you're seeing, Mark," Zack said. He wanted Mark to talk to him.

"Kind of." Mark let out a breath like he was letting go of a burden.

"When I asked, you told me you weren't seeing anyone. Why did you lie?" Zack wasn't angry though. Even when he had heard Mark deny that he was involved with anyone, Zack had known it was a lie or at least some kind of half truth, which was the same as a lie when it came down to it. He just didn't want to think of Mark that way.

"Why didn't you tell me the truth?" Zack pressed him. He felt sure that Mark must have a reason for shutting him out.

"Obviously, because I didn't want you to know."

That kind of answer wasn't going to satisfy Zack. He decided to push harder.

"And you didn't think lying might jeopardize your position," Zack said though Mark's position wasn't in danger even a little bit.

Mark looked at him. He didn't look worried though.

"You are not going to let this go, are you?" Mark asked him. Then he seemed to resign himself to telling Zack more. "I didn't lie. I'm not really seeing him. And I ended it. I'm sorry, I just didn't want to face what was happening."

"I am not going to interfere or stand in the way of your social life. But if he ever comes here again, you have to tell me," Zack insisted.

"I will. I don't think he'll come back. But I'll tell you if he does," Mark agreed.

"So why did you need to sneak around?" Zack asked since Mark hadn't told him what made this relationship so problematic.

"Because I didn't want to explain," Mark said pointedly, but Zack

didn’t let him off the hook.

"What’s to explain? Who is this guy to you?"

"That’s what I don’t want to explain." But then he did. "Roy wants to be straight. He has girlfriends, but he claims that we have something unique."

"So is he bi and stringing you along? Or is he just stringing you along?" Zack asked though it probably wasn’t what Mark wanted to hear.

"I shouldn't have told you anything," Mark said in response to Zack’s bitchiness.

But Zack couldn’t help it. The idea of some guy not appreciating Mark, not thinking he was enough for him was infuriating.

"Really? You think not telling me is the answer?" Zack asked him, more mildly this time.

"You want to hear all of it?" Mark asked almost as a threat.

Zack nodded.

Mark told him that Roy was his best friend and that he was the reason Mark was thrown out of the house. It happened when they were caught together by Mark’s parents in his bedroom. Mark took all the blame. He and Roy had been drinking a little. They were fooling around when Mark’s parents walked in on them. Mark whispered to Roy, "Act drunk." And he did. Roy acted confused and out of it, and Mark admitted that he tried to take advantage of him in that state.

"You deserve better than him," Zack told him. He said it instead of cursing. He wanted to call Roy names, even hit him for what he did. He couldn’t help saying, "He should be dead to you."

"Like I am to my parents? I can't lose everything!" Mark snapped then he stopped himself almost right away. "I mean..."

"I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that. I just don’t want anyone to hurt you," Zack told him.

"I’m OK," Mark assured him.

"By offering to take the blame, were you maybe testing him?" Zack asked just as the thought occurred to him.

"No."

"Are you sure?" Zack asked because Mark didn’t sound sure.

"I wasn’t testing him, but it did turn out that way I guess. At the time, I just didn’t see why both of us had to suffer."

"Just you. What does it tell you when he didn’t have the same instinct to protect you?" Zack couldn’t help lecturing. He couldn’t imagine letting Mark take the fall in his place.

"So when you said you weren't going to interfere in my private life you meant..." Mark asked

"I'm not interfering. I'm making an observation," Zack quibbled.

"Nagging," Mark corrected him.

Though he hated being accused of something as unsexy as nagging, Zack decided not to fight the accusation.

"I nag because I care," he said instead. Zack waited. Then he prompted Mark for what he expected him to say. "Aren't you going to tell me to care a little less?

"No," Mark told him.

"Just enough to take it out of nagging range?" Zack asked still expecting to be told to mind his own business.

"Still no," Mark said instead. He had a funny look on his face. Zack frowned at him. It wasn't a happy look Mark was wearing, but there was something warm about it which was meant for Zack.

"I’m just saying that you aren't wrong," Mark told him.

"Couldn't you just say 'Zack, you're right.'?" Zack asked.

"Can I choose my own word?"

"Only if I can use selective hearing," Zack said.

Mark shook his head.

"So if I am right...?" Zack said wanting Mark to tell him more.

Mark took a long moment with his eyes closed.

"Roy hasn't been around much. A few days after months of being separated. I could give him a little of my time without even thinking about it. But he's here for the rest of the summer. I don't know how much I can give him any more," Mark explained.

Zack felt like he was avoiding the real reason he had pulled away from Roy. But instead of asking him about that, he wanted to make sure that Mark wouldn't go back to him.

"What has he given you?" Zack asked.

"Some small piece of himself he doesn't share with anyone else," Mark said in a lifeless voice. It was like he was repeating something he no longer believed.

"So he's sharing his tiny dick with you? I'm sure he's sharing it plenty while away at college," Zack said bitterly. He hated to think of Mark with this guy however little he was giving him. He didn't deserve to ever set eyes on Mark much less to sleep with him.

"OK. He's a crutch, and I got rid of him," Mark said grudgingly.

"Do you want him as just a friend?" Zack asked. He wanted to be prepared to tolerate this guy as Mark's old friend if he had to.

"I'm not sure he is one." Mark was sad to have to say that.

"I'm sorry."

"I'm thinking that I have better friends than him. And I want to have better lovers," Mark said decisively.

"He wasn't your first was he?" Zack asked hoping Mark would say no.

"Of course he was."

"But there have been other guys," Zack said, worried that he would hear the wrong answer again.

"Yes. But no one I did it with more than a few times."

"No boyfriend?" Zack was not sure how he felt about that. Uneasy was probably the best word for it.

"I'm only nineteen," Mark said defensively.

But that was the problem. Mark was young, and he had never had a

serious relationship. Zack almost wished he didn't know that.

"Right. Sorry. I feel so old," Zack said. Actually, he felt disappointed that Mark seemed even younger to him now.

"You're old and wise," Mark told him, getting back some of his spirit and using it to hit Zack where it hurt.

"I want to be young and ...whatever. I don't care as long as I'm young."

"I'd trade places with you in a second," Mark said.

"No! And miss out on your best sex years. Shut up!"

"Look at all you have," Mark looked at Zack like he really envied him.

Zack wanted to tell him, "You can have everything I have and me too." Instead, he looked around and counted off his assets.

"I have Al, my house, my job, my friends, and I have you."

"See how lucky you are," Mark said with a sweet smile.

"You have some of that. Al and me, whatever I'm worth. You have friends. You live in my awesome house. What more do you want?" Zack asked him. He wanted Mark to say, "You."

"Then we're both lucky," Mark said with that mixture of sadness and happiness that was his specialty.

"You can count on us, you know, me and Al. We aren't going anywhere," Zack told him. He wanted to replace some if that sadness with happiness if he could.

Mark laughed at Zack's earnestness.

"We'll be your rock," Zack told him.

Mark's laugh settled into a smile. He looked at Zack with mostly happy tears in his eyes. Without thinking about it, Zack reached across the table and took Mark's hands in his. He didn't hold them for long, but he felt like he had to do it, almost like he was sealing his promise to him.

Chapter 2

Ending things with Roy made Mark feel renewed and free but a little lost too. He wasn't sure he and Roy could go back to being friends, but he still hoped they could. It really was too much to lose him too. Mark remembered their innocent, childhood days of being best friends. Even after Mark knew he was gay, he never did anything that would disrupt his friendship with Roy. But Roy did. They were watching TV from Roy's bed when he started touching Mark's leg. Moving his hand higher, he was soon cupping Mark's hardening cock. Then it was like they were wrestling. Soon Roy was unmistakably grinding against Mark. After he came, he claimed he just got overexcited because he hadn't gotten off in a while. Each time Roy made a move on him, more and more of their clothes came off, and Roy's excuses made less and less sense. He still made excuses anyway every time it happened until he fucked Mark. After that, Roy said they shared something that was just between them, a special bond. It didn't make them gay. Instead of admitting the truth, Roy's denials only changed shape.

"But I am gay," Mark told him.

Roy wanted to deny that too, pull Mark back into the closet with him. Mark didn't let him. But Roy insisted he was straight and only needed Mark and no other guy. They were still friends until they were caught together. After that, Roy couldn't hide their relationship behind friendship, and Mark became his secret. No one knew they still saw each other.

Mark accepted what he was to Roy .He was his outlet for pent up urges he couldn't accept. But Roy wasn't just horny and looking to get off. He was aroused by Mark, being near him, looking at him. Until now, Mark believed it was worth it, that he had a unique place in Roy's life and in his heart. Mark needed to believe that and to maintain that connection with a childhood friend.

Now Mark had something else. It was Zack who made it possible for him to let go of Roy. Zack stood in contrast to Roy's lies and insecurities. With all his flaws, Zack was perfect.

Though Mark hadn't been completely honest with him at first, Zack was understanding about what Mark was dealing with. He didn't feel even for a second that Zack blamed him or looked down on him.

Mostly he seemed concerned, supportive.

Relieved that Zack knew the truth now, Mark felt even closer to him. He had shared more of his life with him. It was almost like they were building up their relationship. Telling each other things about their lives just seemed to happen naturally. Mark could picture Zack's face when he confided in him. When Zack told him about his family, his eyes would soften, lose that sharp, mischievous glint. His eyes could look so different at times. Though Zack had expressive, blue eyes, they weren't showy. They weren't the kind of eyes that say look at me. They were honest eyes with their own quiet beauty. And if Mark was happy just to be looking into his eyes and never wanted to look away, then they were more than merely beautiful.

They were finishing up breakfast when Zack turned to Mark. In an absentminded moment, Mark had been gazing at him. Having been caught at it, he looked away and hoped he wasn't blushing. Zack was silent then he cleared his throat before he spoke.

"Starting next week, I'll be on vacation, and in your way, all day long," Zack reminded him, but Mark only smiled at the bad news. Zack had some good news too. "Yuka's parents own this little house on the beach. I mean right on the beach. They let us use it for a week now and then. The first week of my vacation, the house is available. Some friends of theirs cancelled, and we're in. I'm hoping you can go too," Zack said and cringed. He looked like he was afraid Mark wouldn't be able to go.

"For a week? Unless I have a test I can't miss, I should be able to go," Mark said.

"Find out for sure," Zack urged him like he couldn't stand the suspense. He grabbed Mark's forearm in his eagerness then let go. It was just a quick squeeze, over before he knew it. But Mark felt like he had to teach himself how to breathe all over again.

Mark had good news. There were no tests that week. Zack looked like he wanted to jump for joy. He didn't, but he didn't hide how happy he was either. Mark, on the other hand, had to suppress a shiver of anticipation at the thought of spending time with Zack on the beach. If a little touch on the arm meant so much to him, how would he deal with Zack on the beach? Images of Zack wet, sun drenched, and nearly naked flashed through his mind and made him crazy, and soon they wouldn't be just in his imagination.

Zack was worried about Mark after he found out what happened with his friend and that he had given him up. On top of his family's rejection, another loss must have been hard to take. Zack wanted to make sure Mark was doing OK. Seeing that he had stayed home to study the last few days, Zack urged him to go out instead.

"Go have fun," he said to him "Go out with your friends. Don't stay cooped up in here."

"I'm studying," Mark told him with an amused look.

These days Zack was extra solicitous toward Mark. Mark must have noticed and was waiting for Zack to get over it. That's how it seemed to Zack anyway.

"I just mean it's good for you to get out while you can. You're stuck with Al all day. And you'll be stuck with us at the beach house all next week," Zack said, but then Al came into the room and jumped into the conversation.

"Dad, don't bother Mark," Al said to him.

"I'm not," Zack assured him.

Zack thought at first that Al might keep Mark from studying in peace. He had warned him, "Al, don't bother Mark when he's studying in the evenings. Leave him alone. This is not Al time. This is Mark time." Actually, Al had been pretty good about letting Mark study. Zack was relieved because that meant that Mark didn't have to close himself up in his room to get some peace and quiet. Zack liked having him with them in the living room, even if he was busy and not interacting with them much.

"You want a drink or a snack? We have those big, fat pretzel sticks," Zack asked Mark since he was on his way to the kitchen.

"Dad, don't bother Mark when he's studying," Al said to him even more sternly than before.

"I was just offering him..."

"This is Mark time, not Dad time. Leave him alone," Al said.

"OK." Zack put his hands up in surrender.

Mark somehow managed to keep a straight face as he thanked Al for his help.

And maybe Zack didn't need to worry so much about Mark. He had noticed that Mark was more cheerful these days, and that was before he told him about the trip to the beach. Of course, his mood was infectious to Zack. The thought of Mark being truly happy made his heart well up with joy. Zack wondered at himself when he felt like that. His feelings for Mark were just too strong. It seemed impossible that nothing would happen between them. Here was this beautiful man in his house and in his life, fitting in like he was born to be there. Mark was wonderful in every way. He had only one flaw. He was too young. That one problem triggered every worry Zack had about bringing a man into his life with Al. He had to give Al security and permanence. Mark was just too young to make a life-long commitment to Zack and Al no matter how much he seemed to belong. Sooner or later, he would want more, he would feel trapped. Then Zack would have to deal with two broken hearts, his own and Al's. The thought of Al's unhappiness was unbearable. No one would break Al's heart as long as Zack could prevent it simply by staying uninvolved.

It was a few days before they would be going to the beach house. Zack had picked up Al from Little Rainbow only to be barraged with some sort of complaint against Mark.

"He picked me up, and I'm not a baby, and there was a dog," Al said, not making much sense.

"Where did Mark pick you up from? And what dog?" Zack asked.

"You're not listening," Al accused him.

"You're not making sense," Zack told him.

"Mark was mean!"

"You are a terrible witness for the prosecution. I'll talk to Mark about it," Zack decided.

"Yell at him and punish him," Al said.

Zack had a suspicion that he wouldn't be doing either to Mark, but Al was a different matter. One thing Al had made clear was that a dog was involved. That made whatever happened almost certainly Al's fault.

When Mark came home, he was a little grumpy. He and Al glared at each other a little in a way that Zack found refreshing. After all, he was stuck with the role of designated bad guy most of the time. He liked being the good guy for a change, but he knew this reversal wouldn't last. Al would soon be Mark's biggest fan again. Zack followed Mark into the kitchen. Then Al joined them looking up at Zack then Mark like he was expecting fireworks. Zack decided to let Mark get some dinner and left Al to get bored and give up. Once he and Mark were alone, he invited him to talk about it.

"I heard Al's version. Didn't understand a word of it. I'm ready for the adult version now," Zack said and made himself comfortable at the table across from Mark.

"We were walking over by the little park with the fountain. And there was this dog," Mark started to say. He was clearly irritated over what happened. "This stupid woman had him off the leash. And this dog was not friendly even if she claimed he was. He barked and growled at Al. So I pick up Al. This dog is growling, and Al still wants to pet him! And this stupid woman just keeps saying how he's a nice dog, a friendly dog. He growled at a little kid! That's not friendly or nice." Mark then lowered his voice. "Al got mad at me because I wouldn't let him down, and I yelled at him. He said I shouldn't pick him up because he isn't a baby."

Zack laughed a little. Mark didn't.

"I see what he was talking about now. I'm sure you know you did the right thing. Al is such a nightmare sometimes."

"I could have handled it better," Mark said always ready to take responsibility.

"How? You did fine. Al will get over it faster than you think. Anyway, you have my vote. That's what counts."

Mark gave him an irresistible look that mixed gratitude and something else. Zack wondered if he was made of stone to have resisted him all this time.

"Plus Al adores you," Zack said.

"I'm not so sure."

"I am. I know because he takes you completely for granted," Zack explained.

"That's your proof?" Mark was still doubting him.

"There's no greater proof. You're like a fixture."

Mark stared at him like he was crazy, but Zack didn't buy it. There was a smile hiding under there.

"You know I'm right. Now I'll go give Al a lecture about safely interacting with dogs," Zack said.

"You are going to bake him write a big sorry, aren't you," Mark predicted correctly.

Having gotten the facts, Zack went to talk to Al. He was pouting about it even before Zack made him write the sorry.

"I hate Mark," Al declared.

"Do you? So when we go to the beach house, we should leave Mark at home?" Zack asked him.

"No!" Al said immediately, his eyes growing wide at the idea of leaving Mark behind.

"Maybe he would like to stay home by himself."

"No, he wouldn't. He has to come."

"I thought you hated him," Zack said.

"I do," Al said with absolutely no conviction.

"Then he can stay home, and we'll go without him."

"No!" Al protested vehemently.

"Oh, just admit you like him," Zack urged him.

"No."

In the face of Al stubborn denials despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, Zack wondered what he would say if this conversation was taking place in reverse. Would he be admitting how much he

liked Mark? If the question came up, Zack suspected he wouldn't be winning any prizes for honesty. All he knew was how much he was looking forward to their time at the beach.

Chapter 22

When they went to the beach, PJ had to be left at home. Zack set aside a big block of time for Al to say goodbye to her. Again Zack had to explain that taking her to the beach house was too risky. Al seemed to expect a last minute change of heart and kept begging to be allowed to take her. Having to leave her made the first part of the trip sad for him. He kept waving out the window even after the house was out of sight.

They took the scenic route, stopping on the way so many times, Zack thought they would never get there. Finally the shore was in sight. All of them looked at the view of the sea excitedly. Zack made Al pick out the house among all the others. He made a few wrong guesses, but he knew it when they arrived. They parked, and Zack watched Mark's reaction. He took it all in with a faint, blissful smile on his face. The house was simple and white with a big porch facing the ocean. Al clambered out of the car, desperate to move around.

"My butt got smooshed," Al complained, and he walked around aimlessly just to stretch his legs. Then he was in a hurry to go into the water.

"We're going to be spending ninety percent of our vacation time applying sunscreen on that child," Zack groused. He had bought a ton of it.

They moved their stuff in and assigned bedrooms. Al never stopped jumping up and down to be allowed to go to the beach.

"Let's go! Let's go, you slow pokes!" he demanded.

"Where's this speed when we need to get you to school?" Zack asked.

Then when Zack was in his swim trunks, Al had his usual commentary.

"Look at the hairy beast!" Al said pointing at his father.

While Al made fun of him, Zack was determined not to look straight at Mark. All he knew about what he looked like was that he was wearing blue and white Hawaiian print swim trunks. Zack was determined to

take in the sight of him gradually. Getting used to seeing his muscled legs with the dark hair first, he would work his way up his body in increments. That way he wouldn't be overwhelmed. Mark couldn't help being beautiful, and Zack couldn't handle taking in the sight of him all at once.

As they walked toward the shoreline with towels under their arms, Al announced his plan.

"Mark is going to teach me to swim," Al said.

"I'm going to teach you," Zack said. He had already taught him a little bit, but apparently that wasn't good enough.

"No. Mark will do it," Al insisted.

"Why Mark and not me?" Zack whined.

"You're iffy."

"Iffy? Iffy?"

Al nodded sagely. Zack didn't even want to know what he meant by that. Seeing that things were only going to go from bad to worse, he gave up.

"Here. He's all yours," Zack said to Mark peevishly as he handed him Al's water-wings. "Teach this ego destroying child how not to drown."

"I think I'll teach him how to swim. It sounds less morbid," Mark proposed.

"You can teach me both," Al said to Mark.

Since Al was in Mark's capable hands, Zack swam out far from shore then back. It worried him to be away from Al especially on a beach with no life guard. Though he did like not being whistled at for going so far out. As he came back, he sat on the edge of the water and watched Al swimming with Mark's help. He was deliberately keeping Mark on the edge of his field of vision as he admired Al's progress. It wouldn't be right to stare at Mark outright, but this way he was just a blurry outline. Still, Zack could see him move, the characteristic motion that identified him as much as anything about him. When he moved he moved very quickly, but he could also be very still and calm. Zack could even tell when he was concentrating because the way he focused and paid attention whether to a person or a thing was

also unique to him. Zack wished he could just turn his back, ignore him or even better, stare at him openly, gorge on the sight of him. But he was compelled to ration short glimpses of him in the water, with wet hair, droplets of water on his skin, and the ocean sparkling around him as it reflected the sun. He allowed himself at leas that much, just to take this little pleasure.

In the afternoon, they went for a walk into town. They planned to eat dinner somewhere afterward. The promenade along the beach was crowded with everyone who had the same idea. Zack was on the phone so he hung back. Observing Mark and Al in a new environment as they walked ahead of him, Zack saw them in a new way. They didn't really look alike, but they had more in common than Zack did with either of them. They both had dark eyes, though Mark's were darker as was his hair. They were both of mixed parentage. He didn't think that Mark could pass for Al's father though, maybe a young uncle.

But Joey, the guy who ran the little beachside snack bar made a different connection. They went up to the bar because Al wanted one of their crazy smoothies with ten kinds of fruit sticking out of it.

"After dinner," Zack promised him. As Mark and Al moved off to pick out smoothies for later, Joey came close to talk to Zack. He had gotten to know Zack and Al from their previous trips. After some chatter about the weather, how long they were staying, and local gay gossip, he indicated Mark.

"I see you finally got yourself a boyfriend. Good for you. It's about time."

Before he could congratulate him any more, Zack interrupted him.

"He is Al's nanny."

"With benefits?" he asked.

"No."

"Then I'll get the word out that he's available," he threatened.

"Don't," Zack practically growled.

Joey said a knowing "Aha" as he moved off to attend to another customer.

Zack wondered how many people made the assumption that they were together. Where they so much like a couple? It had been so long since he had been a part of one that Zack didn't know. He didn't really mind. More and more often, he wished it was true. As he walked away with Mark and Al, Zack could see what other people saw. They were a happy couple vacationing with their little boy.

Mark wasn't sure what to expect of the place. The street that ran behind the beach house was half covered with sand. The neighborhood was quiet with houses spaced out along the beach at good intervals. Further on there were some small hotels that looked like they had been around for decades. There weren't too many people around, but it wasn't lonely either.

The Mishima's beach house was painted white with a slightly weather beaten look like you would expect of a house facing the ocean. Inside, the wood beams were also painted white but looked brighter of course. It wasn't a large house, but it looked comfortable with a small kitchen and living room plus the three bedrooms. The décor was blue and gray and sort of impersonal. There were no family photos anywhere. It made Mark wonder about Yuka's parents. But all thoughts left Mark's head when he saw Zack dressed for the beach. Mark could see why Al called him the hairy beast. Zack had a nice amount of hair over his chest, arms and legs. His back was free of hair and muscular. Mark found his golden body hair incredibly attractive in a devastatingly masculine way. He had to force himself to look away from him. But he saw flashes of his skin, his arms flexing, his broad, well defined chest. It was like someone had made him out of Mark's secret dreams.

Spending time with Zack on the beach was a kind of sweet torture. Too much of him was visible, and his body was even more attractive than Mark had imagined while he admired him with his clothes on. Zack was now kneeling by the water's edge helping Al build a "sand-house for animals" as Al called it. Al was trying to tell Zack what to do while Zack teased him constantly. Mark noticed the wet sand that had stuck to Zack in places. His back was taught, with muscles rippling as he moved. Zack's legs were nicely muscled with light brown hair making them furry.

Mark watched Zack's muscles move, drinking in the sight of so much of Zack exposed under the sun. His brain was short-circuiting from the sudden overload. Mark got an immediate hard-on at the thought of running his hands over those legs. Now he would have to sit there

until it went away. Damn that Zack for having that body. Mark just wanted to push him down in the sand and ride him for all he was worth, damn him.

It wasn't much easier later. Zack wore jeans and a t-shirt, but he still looked too sexy. Mark noticed the bulge of his biceps half revealed by the t-shirt sleeves and also his ass in those jeans. Mark swore he would look at anything but him, but his eyes wouldn't obey him. They kept returning to Zack's body. It didn't help when Zack turned to face him and flashed those bright, blue eyes at him. His eyes weren't like the sea or like the sky. They were somewhere in-between, where sea and sky meet and seem to touch.

Later on, when Mark was in bed, he couldn't stop thinking about Zack. All the day's images accumulated to torment him. Zack's dark blond hair was tussled by the sea and the wind. He was already a little more tanned, and his eyes were bluer than ever. He was so vivid in Mark's mind. It was like he could touch him. But he could only touch himself as he had done so many times while thinking of Zack.

The house had no air-conditioning, and a sea scented breeze came in through the screened windows. Mark wasn't restless because of the heat. The ticking of the clock in Mark's room was too loud. The ticking seemed to be telling him that time was short. They only had a week here. He had to make his move now. This time away from home seemed golden, fated for taking action.

The sound of the waves whispering against the shore came in faintly. Mark stood up like a sleepwalker. He didn't think. He just moved. First he made sure Al was asleep. Then without knocking, he walked into Zack's room. Zack didn't stir as Mark locked the door behind him. The sheet was off to the side. The room was lit by moonlight as was Zack's body. He looked so breathtaking. As Mark sat on the bed, it was more like he dropped there because he couldn't stand. Zack woke up immediately.

"Al is asleep. I checked," Mark said as he lowered the waistband of the shorts Zack slept in. He watched Zack's chest rise and fall with breaths growing deeper, faster. Mark leaned down and took Zack's already hardening cock in his mouth. The organ was beautiful, large. It tasted of the sea and of Zack. It was perfect. He felt Zack's whole body rise seeking the warmth of his mouth. But soon Zack made himself stay still, leaving his needs at Mark's mercy. Out of the corner of his eye, Mark saw Zack's mouth open, but he stopped any sound from coming

out. Then Mark closed his eyes to savor him. He felt Zack's arm go across his back. His hand caressed Mark's side and he shivered.

"If you don't slow down, I won't last," Zack warned him. His voice was deep and intoxicating, but Mark listened to his words. He had let his own excitement get the better of him. He forced himself to ease off, not to suck so hard and fast. That way they could both enjoy it longer. The gentler sucking and licking made Zack come soon enough. Mark's whole body shook as he drank him in. It was heaven.

He sat up still swallowing. Now that this essential thing was over, Mark looked to Zack for what would happen next. He worried that Zack would throw him out.

Zack sat up and pulled Mark close to him. He stared into his eyes. Then he wrapped his arms around him. He seemed to be waiting. For a while Mark didn't know for what. He couldn't think. Then Zack pulled him even closer but still did nothing else. Then Mark understood what he wanted and kissed him so deeply he couldn't breathe. He thought he would drown in that kiss. Kissing him hard enough to push Zack flat on his back, Mark lay on top of him so he could spread his kisses everywhere. Mark groaned as he stripped off his own shorts, hating to take time away from Zack's body. He wanted to devour him. Now that Mark was naked, Zack's hand searched his body. Finding his ass, Zack fondled him. Then he reached between their bodies to Mark's erection. Mark pushed his hand away. If Zack took hold of him, he would come in seconds. Zack had strong beautiful hands. He used them to draw Mark up to him for a kiss on the mouth. Zack knew how to kiss. He kissed like no one else, sweet and intense, deep and soulful. His lips and tongue moved from Mark's mouth down to his neck. Then Zack was kissing his chest, all the while his strong arms held Mark.

"God, you're beautiful," Zack said, and Mark couldn't believe his ears. He wanted to tell Zack that he was the one who deserved those words. But he was too busy holding back the louder noises that threatened to escape from him as Zack kissed lower and lower.

Zack's mouth traveled down his body. His tongue dipped into his navel. Zack rubbed his face against the hairs leading him down to Mark's cock. Licking him gently, he teased the head. Then Zack sucked him in deep. The heat and the warmth of his mouth as it closed around him were a welcoming joy. Zack didn't suck long before Mark's whole body tensed and come shot into his mouth. Mark loved the sight of Zack sucking him to the last drop then throwing his head

back.

"How can you taste so good?" Zack said. He looked at Mark almost like he was expecting some kind of answer. Then he kissed him, and they were rolling on the bed, their hands all over each other.

Mark awoke in Zack's arms startled by a noise. Zack was awake too now.

"Crap! Al," Mark said as he scrambled out of bed and looked around for his shorts. The noise he heard was Al fumbling in the bathroom. After dressing quickly, Mark poked his head outside Zack's bedroom door cautiously. He couldn't see Al though he could still hear him. He snuck out of Zack's room without being seen and went to his room without even a backwards look at Zack. That was probably for the best. Mark knew he had kind of made a fool of himself. First by going into Zack's room, then with the way he had acted in his bed. He wanted it to at least be a brief, calm, dispassionate encounter, just to satisfy his lust for Zack. But once he got a taste of him, he couldn't stop. With embarrassment, he remembered how much he had kissed and licked him, how much he had moaned. Zack returned a lot of that, but he was only following Mark's lead, and it was Mark who was out of control. Mark wondered if showing him that side of himself, that sex crazed idiot, he had jeopardized everything he had with Zack and Al.

Zack’s first thought had been to worry that some sort of emergency had brought Mark to his bedroom in the middle of the night. The tone of his voice, more than his words, told Zack that this was something else. Soon Mark’s intentions were clear, expressed so directly and simply that Zack could only accept what he was given. As Mark freed his cock, Zack had no choice but to welcome his touch. He had a sense of inevitability, of things finally falling into place. Mark’s mouth was where his cock was meant to be.

Afterward, looking into Mark’s eyes had been a revelation. They were dark and deep, almost bottomless. They pulled him in with their beauty and gave him a feeling of acceptance, belonging, a sense of forever. He could only tear himself from them because Mark’s mouth demanded his kiss, and then his whole body called for Zack’s mouth all over it. Zack wanted to know his body, to touch and taste it. Mark was perfection, both chiseled and smooth. It was like someone had gift wrapped an angel in muscled, irresistible flesh. His cock was

glistening, perfectly ripe, begging to be tasted. At first, Zack only dared to lick him, afraid he couldn't hold back and would suck him dry in a second. Mark's cock stood out from his dark hair, a perfect column of flesh, weighty, thick, beautiful. Taking it into his mouth, Zack felt he had reached a summit and to go higher from there he had to fly. Sucking Mark was like nothing else he had ever experienced. He was torn between never wanting it to end and wanting to see Mark come. As he came, Zack felt he had worshiped him and been rewarded. The two of them hardly paused to lock eyes before they were all over each other. Zack was surprised when he woke up, not by the noise, but because he hadn't fallen asleep by choice. As long as he could look at Mark, he never wanted to close his eyes.

Chapter 23

Despite his doubts, that night had been the best of his life. After Mark slipped out so Al wouldn’t see him, Zack felt blissful as he remembered how they had loved each other. He could still feel the warmth and the weight of Mark in his arms.

Zack lingered in his room, letting Mark and Al get to the beach ahead of him. When he went into the kitchen, he saw that they had made peanut butter sandwiches with grapes not grape jelly. They had taken them to the beach with them and left one in the kitchen for Zack. He poured himself a cup of coffee, grabbed the sandwich and went to join them.

As he went toward Al and Mark sitting with their feet splashed by waves, Zack had a sense of inevitability again, but in a different way. When he sat down to join them, he had a feeling of completion. A piece had clicked into place. Al was chattering at him. Mark was determinedly looking at the boats on the horizon. Then Mark turned his eyes to Zack, and Zack grinned so big that Al immediately started questioning him about it.

"Why am I getting buried?" Zack grumbled as the sand was piled on top of him.

"We voted for you," Al reminded him, exasperated that Zack was so forgetful.

"You mean you voted against me," Zack corrected him.

"Are you sure we can't cover his face?" Al asked Mark. "We can give him a straw for breathing."

"Or a crazy straw," Zack suggested sarcastically.

Of course Al missed the sarcasm and loved that idea. Mark mercifully still said no.

After Al and Mark diligently covered him with sand then packed it down, Zack was almost completely encased. He pretended to sleep for the last part of it. When they were done, and Al was again asking to

cover his face, Zack suddenly stood up and growled. Al screamed. Mark pretended to be scared. Zack growled that he was the Sand Monster and chased Al. Al splashed through the waves and tried to use his plastic bucket to throw water on Zack. Zack pretended that the water hurt him when it actually missed him completely most of the time. Meanwhile, Mark got most of it on video.

Zack and Al came back from down the beach and found Mark looking over the footage he had shot.

"I wish I got you jumping up with the sand falling off in clumps. That would have been great," Mark lamented.

"You have to be quick," Zack told him. Then he announced, "I'm going for a swim." He wanted to wash off the sand that still clung to him and some which had found its way under his swim trunks.

"Me too!" Al said.

"No. Stay with Mark. I want to swim far," Zack told him.

Al whined while Mark frowned.

"Not too far," Mark warned him.

"I can take care of myself. And anyway, if I start to drown, you'll come and save me," Zack said with a smirk.

"He will. Mark is a good swimmer. Much better than you, Dad," Al said.

Zack looked from Al to Mark, who was acting all innocent.

"This kid. Every chance he gets," Zack said.

"He just wants to keep you humble," Mark said smugly.

"I'll bring you back a baby shark," Zack promised Al.

"Really?" Al said with awe and maybe a little fear.

"No. Not really. What would you do with it?" Zack asked, dismayed.

"Aww! No fair!" Al said in frustration.

Zack wished he and Mark could swim out into deep waters together, but they had to take turns watching Al. Al was right though, Mark was

a great swimmer. Zack wanted to build him an Olympic sized swimming pool and watch him swim all day. The way his body cut through the water was something to see. His arms sliced the waves with lightning fast, decisive motions. Watching him, Zack couldn't believe how lucky he was. This man had been in his arms just last night, and probably would be again if Zack didn't come to his senses.

As usual, Zack didn't stay out long. He swam back to see Al practicing his dead man's float under Mark's supervision. When he got close, Al stood up and looked at him expectantly.

"No, I didn't bring you a baby shark. Where would I put it?" Zack said to him just in case that's what he was waiting for.

"In your swim shorts," Al said like it was only reasonable to put a baby shark near ones precious, private organs. Mark laughed at the idea. God knows what he was thinking about Zack's precious organs, but he had certainly liked them last night.

"The truth is, I was going to bring you a baby shark, but then I remembered how you said I was iffy, so I didn't," Zack lied while Mark glared at him.

Al got mad and splashed at Zack.

"You have to do better than that," Zack told him since his splashing didn't reach very far. That was Mark's cue to help him out. His splashing hit the target square in the face. Zack splashed back, and Mark shielded Al with one arm and splashed Zack with the other one. Seeing that, Zack took it easy on them, not that he got any credit for it. They just claimed they had won.

That evening, they had hiked up the wooded hill west of the beach house. They walked by some big, old houses in shaded gardens. They were going toward a hotel restaurant at the top. They ate on the terrace enjoying a spectacular view of the darkening ocean. Afterward, they raced each other down the hill. The path looked different than when they went up earlier in the evening. The trees and bushes gathered the darkness while the path was lit by lights with moths flying around them. Some of the big houses looked dark and mysterious while others were lit up and festive. Their little beach house, with its porch light on, looked extra inviting as they reached it.

When they got to the beach house, though he was tired, Al wasn't ready for bed. Zack was on the phone while Mark did some reading

for class and Al leaned against him. Mark couldn't remember him ever looking bored like that. He guessed at the reason.

"You miss PJ, huh?" Mark asked.

"Yeah," Al said sadly.

"I bet she misses you too. But cats don't like the ocean so she wouldn't have much fun here. And the sand would get in her fur."

"Maybe," Al said not willing to admit that it wasn't a good idea to bring her.

Mark put down his own reading and got a book he and Al could read together. The reading turned into a discussion about a big house where Al could have every animal he wanted. He would build it with George and Yuka's help.

"Isn't that a zoo?" Mark asked him.

"No. A zoo is not a house," Al said.

When he noticed the time, Mark asked him, "Aren't you sleepy?"

"No. I'm never sleepy. Dad just makes me go to bed anyway," Al claimed.

Mark wondered if he was rushing Al to go to bed because he wanted more time alone with Zack. But really, he wasn't sure what would happen. Mark only knew he couldn't stay away. The rest was up to Zack.

Even after Al had been in bed for some time, Zack stayed with him in his room. Mark wondered if Al was having trouble going to sleep or if Zack was avoiding him. When Zack came out of Al's room, Mark didn't like the look on his face. He felt paralyzed. He was afraid of what Zack might say. Even more, he was afraid that Zack might just go to his room and lock the door, sending Mark a wordless message to stay the hell out.

"Don't look like that," was the first thing Zack said as he stood in front of Mark.

Mark was standing too though he didn't remember getting up.

"We need to stop this now, while we still can," Zack sounded like he

was begging.

"Wasn't I good?" Mark challenged him, dared him to deny it.

Zack tried to sidestep the issue.

"You fishing for compliments? Have you ever heard me give a compliment?" Zack asked since he wasn't in the habit of throwing around compliments much.

But Mark had a different answer from the one Zack was expecting.

"Yes, I've heard you give plenty of compliments. To me. All the time." Mark smirked at Zack as if he had sabotaged him. But it wasn't that easy.

"I'm glad you brought that to my attention," Zack told him. "Obviously you've had more than your fair share. You're cut off, mister."

"We'll see," Mark said feeling more invigorated. Talking to Zack always made him feel better. Mark pulled close to him and did nothing more than stare into his eyes. That was enough. Their bodies took over, and they were in Zack's bedroom again. Just being there, being allowed in, gave Mark a feeling of happiness. And if that was happiness, there was no word for how he felt as they kissed. In every way their bodies shared a perfect unity. Mark had never felt closer to anyone. He just wished he could erase all Zack's misgivings and his own.

He could hardly call what Mark did seducing him. All he did was stand close to Zack. But it was allowing Zack to stare into his dark eyes that did it. He wrapped his arms around Mark to hold him there, so he wouldn't move, and he could just keep looking at him.

But a body doesn't just want to be looked at, it wants to be touched. Zack held Mark too close not to feel the hardening of his dick against his own. What a wonderful sensation it was to feel two cocks coming alive together, urging each other on to reach their full potential.

Since he couldn't pretend to resist him, Zack pulled Mark into his bedroom. His dark eyes shone as Zack leaned in slowly for a kiss. As he was kissing him, his hands went to Mark's waist. His fingers were digging in as his need was building then his hands reached behind and down his back to cup that beautiful ass. Mark reached for his ass as well and their groping pushed them closer and closer, jamming their

erections against one another. The unbearable stimulation was building as they kissed and caressed each other.

Zack kissed Mark's neck. Burying his face there, Zack groaned. But Zack wanted to see Mark, his eyes, his half open mouth. Zack leaned in for a thorough, wet kiss. Pressing himself against Mark, Zack felt their hard cocks needing to be freed. He unzipped Mark then himself. Two hard, living instruments were striving to link love with pleasure, to become more than a part of a man's body, to be joined with another, to become one. Zack wanted to laugh at his own feelings, but he couldn't. This was what Mark did to him.

Zack stroked their cocks though they were more than a handful. Thinking about the size of Mark's cock made Zack want it inside him, but his better judgment said no. He gasped as he forced himself not to ask to be fucked. It was even harder to hold back as he stripped Mark, revealing the contours of his body by moonlight. Zack knelt in front of him, feeling like a worshiper again. Looking up, he saw Mark gazing at him in a way that made him shudder. If he asked for it, Mark could have his soul. Instead of asking for anything Mark ran his fingers through Zack's hair then he slipped his hand over the back of his neck and over his shoulders. His touch traveled up Zack's arms to his hands clasped around his waist. Mark moved Zack's hands to his ass. Zack sucked slowly, aware of every movement, every breath, every time Mark swallowed.

Suddenly, Mark made him stop and sit on the bed. After Mark went to his knees but before he started sucking, Zack pulled him into a kiss. Mark allowed the kiss only for a short while. He was hungry for Zack's cock. He started fast almost rushed, but then he slowed down to savor him. Zack lightly caressed Mark's face and his throat while Mark's eyes stayed locked on his. This was a different look from the one Mark had while Zack blew him. Now he looked almost predatory, and again Zack wanted Mark to fuck him. Just as suddenly as he had stopped Zack, Mark pulled his mouth off Zack's cock and pounced on him for a kiss. They rolled on the bed grappling with each other, a picture of perfectly synchronized arousal. Then Mark turned upside down to Zack and lay on his side. He licked Zack's rock hard cock tenderly. He left it to Zack to do whatever he liked with Mark's cock now in range of Zack's mouth. Running his lips and tongue up the shaft, Zack kissed the beautiful, hard flesh. He matched his pace to Mark's until he felt the needs of Mark's body take over. Mark needed to come, and Zack was happy to make it happen. He moaned desperately around Zack's cock then let go of it so he could come, flooding Zack's mouth.

Mark made one of his quick maneuvers, and he was straddling Zack and kissing away the drops of come from his lips. Then it was Zack's turn. Mark kissed down his body as wildly and desperately as if he was the one who hadn't come yet not Zack. He took Zack's cock into his mouth and cupped his balls. With his other hand he teased Zack's ass, fingering the hole with only the tip of his middle finger. That and the taste of Mark on his tongue was enough to make Zack come, surging into Mark's eager mouth. They kissed again sharing the taste of each other, their bodies sweaty and hot to the touch.

Reviving first, Mark sat up then straddled Zack, who could see that sweat had made his body glow. Zack was still reluctant to move a muscle though his cock was rising in response to Mark. When Mark took it in hand, Zack's cock was ready to obey and stiffen for him in record time. Mark's cock was ahead of his own. As Mark joined their cocks together, he had to use both hands to stroke them jointly and firmly. Seeing that Mark aimed for his chest, Zack warned him, "That's going to make a mess."

"That's the idea," Mark said.

Zack rubbed Mark's ass and his powerful legs. His chest heaved in anticipation. They were both sweating even more now. Zack felt like he was burning up. The come hit him from Mark's cock then from his own. Mark leaned forward, placed both hands on Zack's splattered chest to support himself as he kissed Zack.

"Let's cool off," Mark said.

"No skinny dipping for us. Can't leave Al," Zack managed to gasp, out of breath from coming and from kissing Mark.

"Shower," Mark said as he got up. He clearly didn't need to be reminded about Al.

They put on their pants and left the room quietly. The bathroom was down the hall, but they risked it. They slipped in and stepped out of their pants and into the shower. The cold water made them both stifle their gasps and laughter. Zack was already composing an excuse in case they woke up Al. It was something incoherent because he was distracted by Mark's wet body and busy hands. Mark was scrubbing him down vigorously. As he pulled Zack close, Mark rubbed Zack's back hard then his ass and the backs of his legs. Crouching in front of Zack, he soaped up his legs. Mark threw his head back letting the spray of the shower run over him. Zack saw he was aroused again. He

took his turn washing Mark. He did it more gently. Standing behind him, he washed Mark's chest and his hard abs. He soaped up his cock and balls but handled them lightly. Mark leaned into him, his back against Zack's chest, and Zack squeezed him in his arms. Their breathing at first hard and out of sync, unified into one breath. With water running over them, and Mark held against him, Zack never wanted to move. The side of his face was against Mark's until they both turned to share a kiss.

Chapter 24

Once again Mark had woken up in Zack’s bed. It was still early so he felt safe as he quietly left Zack’s room for his own. Just as he reached his door, he heard Al’s voice.

"Why are you sneaking?' Al asked startling Mark.

"Who are you to talk?" Mark asked defensively. From his perspective Al had sneaked up on him though he probably didn’t see him come out of Zack’s room.

"Al," Al said, asserting his identity and his right to question Mark at the same time.

"Oh, is that who you are? I was just being quiet," Mark said since that wasn't a lie. Part of sneaking was being quiet.

Al nodded.

"As long as Dad doesn't catch you," Al said.

"Catch me what?" Mark asked a little bewildered.

"I don't know," Al admitted.

"Do you think I'm doing something wrong?" Mark asked as if he expected the child to absolve him or blame him without even knowing anything about what was going on.

Even without facts, Al did absolve him.

"No. You wouldn't do anything wrong," Al said with blind faith.

"Then I must be very boring," Mark concluded.

"Yeah," Al agreed.

Mark was about to argue with him, to assert his potential as a wrong doer and possibly a bad boy, when he thought better of it. He realized that Al didn't need him to be a bad boy. He needed him to be the same boring, dependable Mark he knew he could count on.

"Thank you for having faith in me," Mark said and put out his hand to shake hands with Al.

"Any time," Al said as he shook his hand vigorously.

Mark praised his manly handshake and then invited him to help with coffee and breakfast.

As Al puttered around the kitchen, Mark couldn't help sneaking a look at him. He felt his heart become constricted in his chest. If things between him and Zack went wrong, he might have to leave Al. All this time it had been building in his heart, but Mark didn't want to acknowledge his love for Al. Mark was so attached to him now, if he had to leave it would crush him. Mark closed his eyes and resolved not to let that happen. He would hold on to Zack and Al both, forever.

As soon as Zack got up, he started teasing Al. He was telling him that he couldn't catch a fish and showed him the little net he had found from the year before. Then he held it up out of Al's reach while Al jumped to catch it. When Zack tried to interfere in the making of oatmeal Mark's way, Al once again demonstrated his faith in Mark by admonishing his father.

"Let Mark make the oatmeal. He knows how to make it good."

"Not too good, I hope," Zack groused.

"It's just a little fruit and honey," Mark told him. "Have a little faith."

Zack was going to the store while Mark and Al were headed to the beach. Zack just put on an unbuttoned short sleeved shirt over his swim trunks and grabbed his wallet. He hadn't shaved and his hair was not thoroughly combed.

"You look like a beach bum," Mark told him. He actually liked the look, found it sexy as hell, but wasn't going to let Zack know that.

"I'm just going to the store," Zack said looking wounded.

Mark shook his head.

"I don't see what's wrong with it?" Zack looked down at himself.

"Nothing. Never mind," Mark said deliberately sounding insincere. But Zack was so gorgeous. His new tan set off his eyes. His hair had

lightened a tiny bit. And the wild man look was deadly to Mark. And the hair on his chest – Mark just wanted to lay his head there and rub his face on it. He wanted Zack naked so bad. He wanted to see his cock and the hair of his crotch then run his hands all over him and lick him everywhere. He wanted to swallow every inch of him down to the root.

This vacation was a beautiful nightmare. All day, Zack tempted him. Then after Al was asleep, there was no struggle or argument. Zack took his hand and led him to his room. He kissed Mark lightly and undressed him slowly.

"You've been driving me crazy all day, "Zack said. He had an uncanny way of saying what Mark was thinking. Zack took his own clothes off more quickly and stood in front of Mark hard and ready. Leading Mark to the bed, he had him sit then lie back. Mark gasped as Zack's hand skimmed over the center of his chest down to his stomach. The hand stopped to rest there, and Mark groaned. Zack's other hand played with Mark's balls as he took his cock in his mouth. The pull of his mouth was gentle but insistent, drawing pleasure from his whole body to center on his cock then bloom outward to fill him. Rubbing his hands through Zack's tangled hair, Mark poured his come on his tongue. He sat up into Zack's arms, and they kissed. Mark gently licked the sunburn on Zack's shoulders. Kissing his muscled arms and his chest, he slid down his body. He felt Zack's chest hair against his face like he wanted to all day. He rubbed his face against his legs too then up until his face was nestled in his crotch, and he was inhaling his scent. Sucking down the length of Zack's cock greedily, he took it in until it hit the back of his throat. He wanted it in all the way but had to settle for gripping the rest in his hand. With a powerful shudder, Zack release shook them both and flooded into Mark's mouth.

Now they kissed lazily, more to keep each other awake until they were recovered. As Mark's hands explored the curves of Zack's ass, he couldn't help but think about fucking Zack. His fingers were guided to the hole naturally. It was clear that Zack welcomed the probing of his fingers.

"Can I fuck you?" Mark asked, whispering in Zack's ear.

"You are a dream come true," Zack said with a smile as Mark looked at him.

Mark rolled his eyes then asked for confirmation.

"Can I take that as a yes?"

"You can take that as a ‘Yes, please.’"

Zack got lube and a condom from his bag and gave them to Mark along with a long kiss. He got one pillow out of the way and put another one under him. Bringing up his knees, he held them against his chest to offer himself to Mark. Before starting, he caressed Zack’s cock and his balls. He moved his hand down and pressed in with the tip of his finger. Zack was tight. Mark was tempted to ask him how long it had been for him.

Watching the response of Zack’s body, Mark worked in a single finger. Another followed drawing gasping breaths from Zack. "Oh, Mark," Zack called his name in a whisper. Three fingers were now sliding in and out of him, and Zack breathed in rhythm with the pumping. Mark didn’t need to ask if Zack was ready. Putting one hand on the back of Zack’s thigh, Mark guided his cock in with the other. It was a tight fit. He could hear Zack catching his breath then letting it go with a shudder. Zack’s body marked the progress of Mark’s cock deeper inside him by tightening then loosening around him. Zack was sweating with the effort of taking every inch. When he felt Mark’s body press against him, Zack let out a silent, triumphant laugh. Mark rocked against him to make sure he was all the way in where he needed to be. Zack rocked with him sighing with ecstasy. Though Mark pulled back slowly, Zack still hissed. His insides didn’t want to let Mark go.

Mark knew from experience that he couldn’t just slap on some lube and ram it up a guy’s ass the way smaller men could. He had learned to work his way in slowly. And it was no big deal. But with Zack it was different. He wanted so badly to make him feel good, but to do that he had to fight his need for him. He had never felt so driven to be inside some one and to fuck the hell out of him until he was spent. Mark willed himself to stay in control every second.

Mark had said those beautiful word "Can I fuck you?" and now it was actually happening. As Mark was digging his fingers into his hole, he had on a serious expression with his mouth tight then his lips parted and he was breathing as hard as Zack.

Zack felt a thrill like he couldn’t remember from any other sexual

encounter. He wanted Mark filling him up, but first he had to endure the slow pressure of Mark's cock opening the way inside him. Every extra second Mark spent making sure to wait for Zack's body to adjust to his big cock, Zack wanted him that much more. Even when he was all the way in Zack wanted to take in more of him. Zack rested his legs against Mark's shoulders to free his hands so he could fondle him. As he pressed in, Mark leaned over Zack and looked into his eyes. Then Mark pulled back, and Zack yearned to feel the weight of his body again and have him inside fully. They took it slow for a while until Zack's body started to cooperate with the thrusting of Mark's cock. Now Mark could pump faster, and Zack felt deep and open to him, made for him. Mark rammed pleasure right up his spine, filled him with bliss like he had never experienced. Zack watched Mark's progress toward orgasm and stroked his cock to catch up to him. He had to fight the power of his thrusts so he wouldn't be pushed back as Mark slammed into him. They both strained, sweated, used their strength to come together. Then Zack saw Mark fight to contain the sound of pleasure that wanted to escape his body just as he did the same. They had been overcome by it together but held on, stayed quiet and looked at each other proudly before they collapsed, exhausted.

At first it seemed impossible to move. Zack felt drugged, heavy, incapable of separating himself from Mark as if they had been fused together in the act of lovemaking and shared one body. But slowly their bodies loosened and came back to life as separate beings. They were still happy, still touching but conscious of who they were and who was lying there. Sliding his face closer to Mark and kissing his lips was all the movement Zack was capable of.

Mark had heard Zack's snoring before, but only through his bedroom door, in passing. The rumbling was louder than he had expected probably because it was right next to his ear. When he tried to move away, he found that Zack was holding him tightly even in sleep. Mark reached over and pinched his nose. Zack's eyes snapped open, and Mark let go of him. Barely awake, Zack gave him a confused look.

"You were snoring," Mark explained.

"So you tried to kill me?"

"Yes. It's only fair."

Zack groaned and snuggled up to him again. Mark vowed silently that

he would finish the job if he started snoring again. Until then he would kiss Zack's sunburned shoulder and enjoy the feel of his muscular body as it fully relaxed in sleep against his own.

Chapter 25

Zack had gone back to the house to make sandwiches and brought them out to Mark and Al for lunch.

"Be careful or those will be real sand-wiches," Zack said then waited for Al to get the pun. Nothing happened, so he tried again. "Sand-wiches. Get it?"

"Yes. Sandwiches," Al said, clearly not understanding Zack's sophisticated humor.

"He means sandwiches with sand in them. Sand-wiches," Mark explained.

Al thought for a second then laughed. Even if it took some extra work, hearing that laugh was still worth it.

As Al went to splash his feet in the waves, Zack leaned back on his elbows and said, "These are happy times."

Mark gave him one of those bottomless looks he had only let him see recently. It was like the inner Mark had been locked away all this time, and only now he had opened up to reveal a treasure meant only for Zack.

"I feel like, if I couldn't see you again, I would want to be blind," Zack said to him but kept his voice low.

"How very impractical," Mark said. His eyes might say everything, but Mark refused to put what he felt into words. Though he wasn't shy about teasing Zack for what he said.

"Just call me a dork. That's what you meant," Zack grumbled.

"I think if you weren't a dork, I would hate you because then you'd be perfect," Mark said as he settled himself into the warm sand.

"Good thing I'm a dork then." Zack turned on his side so he could look at Mark. He propped up a book in front of him so he wouldn't look too obvious. Not able to resist, he made sure Al wasn't watching, and he reached out his hand and took Mark's. At first, all he felt was that their hands were gritty with sand. Then he felt Mark's hand squeeze

his, and an incredible tingling warmth traveled up his arm. Al started to turn around and they let go. Though he hadn't seen them holding hands, Al still looked at them funny.

They slept in Zack's bedroom because it was further from Al's and shared no walls with his room. Mark was just closing and locking the door behind him. He stripped off his shorts and climbed to sit at the foot of the bed opposite Zack. Earlier that day, when Mark was lying on the beach, Zack was dying to touch more than his hand. Zack pulled Mark closer to him until Mark was straddling him. Zack sighed. What a sight. He felt up those young muscles, defined, writing their shape on his skin where they bulged. But an even better sight followed as Zack turned Mark around so his ass was toward Zack. Swallowing the groan that almost left his throat, Zack enjoyed the feeling of his cock being sucked into Mark's mouth. Zack groped Mark's ass as they both moaned. He stroked Mark's cock feeling it ooze, hard as steel. Zack wanted to taste it so he didn't make him come this way. But Mark was writhing and panting as he sucked. Zack knew the signs of his need becoming unbearable. He licked his thumb then gently pressed it into Mark's hole. Mark pushed back to take it in all the way then rode it as he sucked. He didn't come though but as soon as Zack came, Mark turned around whip-fast, ready for more. Grabbing Zack's arms, he pulled him lower on the bed. Straddling his head, Mark took Zack's hand and placed it behind him while bringing his cock to Zack's mouth.

Mark pumped into his mouth gently in rhythm with Zack's fingering. When he came, Zack felt the powerful spasm around his fingers as come hit the back of his throat. But even then Mark didn't let Zack withdraw his fingers. He kept driving his body back for more like nothing could satisfy him. Zack had a suspicion about what he really wanted. Then Mark actually said it.

"I think I want you to fuck me. I think I need it," Mark said as Zack eased his fingers out of him.

"I'll fuck you any time you want," Zack said.

"Now."

Zack smiled up at him like he didn't think Mark was serious. Mark leaned over him and looked into his eyes.

"You saw me. I'm dying for it."

"Still?" Zack asked.

"Even more now." At Zack's questioning look he said, "Haven't you noticed that I can't get enough of you?" Zack shook his head, not taking him seriously.

Mark laid himself out on top of him, chest to chest. He then stretched his arms out until they covered Zack's and took his hands. He buried his face in Zack's neck.

"You've done that before?" Zack wanted to know

"Yes," Mark said though it sounded like he didn't want to say more.

"How did it feel?"

"Fine," Mark told him, again holding back.

Zack freed his hands from Mark's and started caressing his back. He lingered over his ass then ran his hands up until he was holding him.

Though Zack wanted to have him, Mark's hesitation before he answered and whatever he wasn't telling Zack, made him delay doing as Mark asked. Zack told him he would give him until tomorrow night to think about it. For now there were other fun things to do.

Mark awoke to a feeling that was now almost familiar. It was the feeling of being too warm next to another body but not really minding. Zack shifted next to him waking up too. They both listened for Al, but the faded light told them it was still early. Looking at each other they wondered if they had time for a quickie. But it was too risky. Al would be up any minute. Mark got out of bed and Zack moaned. The sound told Mark that he would miss him.

Thinking about the night before as he brushed his teeth, Mark felt like he had missed an opportunity, and not to get fucked. Zack had asked him about his sexual experiences, and Mark had told him as little as possible. Though Mark wanted to tell Zack more, he didn't want to talk about Roy at a time like that. He didn't want Roy in that bed with them.

Mark had loved the intrusion of Zack's fingers more than he could have imagined. He thought back to his past experiences. Usually Mark did the fucking. Only Roy had fucked him while other guys had fingered him. It was nothing like what he felt with Zack. He knew it

was because he wanted Zack so completely. He needed him inside. To have a part of Zack inside his own body thrilled him. It meant being touched by him in a new, intimate way. He wanted it badly. But it worried him too. Being fucked was something he only learned to enjoy, but never allowed anyone but Roy. Mark didn't think it was for him. He never intended to do it with anyone else. And now he had undergone this sudden change of heart. He worried that he was getting carried away and that he wouldn't like it. A bigger cock than Roy's would be more of a challenge. It might be more pain than pleasure. But then Mark remembered who he was dealing with. He could see Zack as if he was staring at him from the bathroom mirror. Mark wanted to kick himself for worrying. He trusted Zack ,and he wanted him in every way. Whatever happened, if it was with Zack, it would be good.

Chapter 26

Zack hadn’t meant to go back to sleep. The light had been pale when Mark left his room. Now it was too bright. He tried to close his eyes tighter against the light flooding the room then groaned. But soon he became aware of the smell of sea air. Faintly hearing a voice that sounded like Al, Zack raised himself on his elbows. He went over to the window and saw Al and Mark playing on the beach. He hurried to get ready and join them. It was nice of Mark to let him sleep, but Zack wished that he had kept him awake with a blow job instead. As he got ready, Zack thought briefly about last night. But his thoughts turned quickly to tonight when Mark would be in his bed, and he would say yes. His absolute certainty about Mark’s answer told Zack that the delay had only been for his own peace of mind. There was never any real doubt.

Since it was supposed to be a vacation, Al was not happy if he suspected Zack of working. Seeing him on the phone, Al slowly approached Zack. Al leaned close to him over the armrest of the couch. Zack pulled the phone away from his ear.

"What?"

"Are you working?" Al asked.

"I'm talking on the phone."

Al seemed unsure whether that made Zack guilty or not. He left him alone, but he had an "I'll be back" look in his eyes.

After he was done talking on the phone, Zack sneaked up on Al. He grabbed him and rubbed his smooth face with his unshaved one.

"Ahh! Dad! Your face is scratchy," Al complained.

"That's because I am a hairy beast."

"You are a scratchy beast," Al corrected him.

"What to shave my face?"

"Can I?"

"Sure."

"I'll go get the straight razor," Mark said. Zack looked around to see where he was hiding. He was reading, sitting with his legs pulled up in the big armchair. The lamp was on above his head though it was just starting to get dark.

"And where would you get one?" Zack challenged him while he got the electric razor. "Don't drop it," Zack said as he gave it to Al.

"Al, don't stop with the face, shave everything," Mark told him.

Al looked questioningly from Mark to his father.

"Would you really like that?" Zack asked to see if Mark was stating a preference for the hairless look.

"No," Mark admitted sheepishly. Then seeing Zack still looking at him, he added grudgingly, "You're fine the way you are."

Mark found that he was breathing hard even before it was time for bed. His mind went back to his previous experience. He had taken the fucking from Roy only enjoying it after a while. At first he had felt only his insides being seared by Roy's cock as he pushed before Mark was ready to accept the intrusion. After that, he tried to satisfy Roy with blow jobs, but Roy needed more, and Mark gave it to him. He always felt it was a measure of something between them that he did this even though he would have rather done other things, some of which were unthinkable to Roy. Roy would whisper meaningless endearments to him, but in most ways Roy almost shut down during sex as if he didn't know who he was fucking. He only turning back into Mark's friend afterward with some excuse or apology to show that the time for fucking was over, and they were just friends again.

Mark knew one thing without a doubt, Zack would be there with him, not just in body but in every way. This was something they would share. It wasn't going to be earth shattering, it wasn't going to prove anything, but it was going to feel good. And it would give Mark another way to be close to Zack.

Mark stripped slowly as Zack watched. Then he stripped Zack. Exposing his semi-hard cock, Mark looked at it in a new way, with the knowledge that it would be hard as a rock soon, and it would have to fit inside him. Zack saw his worry. When Mark looked at Zack, all he

saw on his face was concern.

"You need to take that look off your face. It's not sexy," Mark warned him.

"If you want to change your mind..."

Mark drew his fingers lightly over his own cock like he was showing off.

"If you can take mine, I can take yours," Mark boasted. He wished he was really sure of that. He pushed aside his worries and lay on the bed. He propped himself up for Zack and opened his arms.

Settling on top of him, Zack kissed him so lightly and gently, Mark couldn't help but think of a wedding night. He tried to push that idea out of his head but couldn't. It turned him on anyway.

"Get serious," Mark told Zack.

Zack kissed him again on the mouth then on the chin. He kissed his neck for a while and then traveled down until his nose was against the base of Mark's cock, buried in his hairs.

After he pulled up Mark's legs, Zack lubed his middle finger and positioned it at Mark's entrance. He only teased the hole until he started sucking Mark's cock then he pushed in.

Mark's first instinct was to try to pull away from the intruding finger knowing what would follow. Even though he forced himself not to move, he felt his opening tighten around Zack's finger. Zack swirled his finger in place, gently as he tongued Mark's shaft. He didn't fight Mark's body for control. He worked his finger in a circle then in and out. Mark's hole began to appreciate the intrusion and so did Mark. As Mark's ass allowed it, Zack added a second finger. Mark tensed against it again, but this time he knew to allow it to pleasure him into acceptance. No matter what he did, Zack knew how to make him feel good.

Three fingers were worked in now. Mark moaned, "More please."

"You're too tight. You have to be patient." Zack wasn't sucking him now. Mark's body couldn't take the extra stimulation. Mark couldn't wait any more.

"Please, Zack. Please." Mark begged, but then he saw that Zack was

adding even more lube, and he knew they were both ready. He smiled at Zack in relief as he pulled his legs up to his chest and out of the way.

The head of Zack's cock touched him, and he gasped. He wanted to open himself up to it, but it was a struggle. The large head nudged him, persuading his body to let it in. Mark moaned feeling it inside him. Thinking about how much more there was, he shuddered. Soon Zack would fill him and Mark couldn't wait. Unexpectedly Mark found himself smiling as Zack sweated over him, panted, stopped then moved forward again slowly entering Mark inch by inch. Mark felt sweat pour off his body. He could hear his own rough breathing in his ears. He felt like he had too much blood inside him. But mostly he felt Zack inside him so he couldn't help but smile. Zack sometimes smiled too, but he had to concentrate, push hard but not too hard. Then Mark felt the full thickness of it and soon Zack's whole body pressing down on him. Zack was in. They both laughed though there was so much more ahead of them. Zack had to pull back slowly, then in again. Each time he gained some speed. Having been stretched by the first few thrusts, Mark could feel his insides easing open, allowing Zack's cock inside him. The pleasure was starting to build up with each thrust. His body and Zack's cock were working together now.

After a while, Zack had to stop and add more lube. Mark moaned for him. But then Mark was in for a new treat. Zack spoke into his ear,

"I'm going to cover your mouth for this," Zack warned him.

He placed his hand over Mark's mouth gently then he pushed inside him in one go. Mark would have screamed with pleasure. Instead he arched his back, let his legs fall on Zack's shoulders, felt Zack's fingers slip inside his mouth. His mouth stayed open with Zack's fingers gently caressing his tongue. Mark took Zack's hand away and swallowed. He needed to speak. He raised himself up as far as he could and stared hard into Zack's eyes.

"Do it again," he demanded.

Zack hesitated. He pulled out then added lube again. So cautious. This thrust wasn't a surprise, but it was still intense. Zack followed it up with long deep thrusts that took Mark's breath away. Zack had a hold of his legs now. He held them more firmly and gave Mark another get ready look then he started pounding him. Mark struggled to stay quiet. He felt like he was being parted, not just opened but revealed, stripped to the core to lie truly naked in front of Zack. He knew that's

what it meant to give himself freely and completely to another man.

"Zack," he said calling to him the way you might when it's dark and you want to make sure you're not alone.

Zack moaned. Then actual speech left his mouth as he slowed down for deep, even thrusts.

"Mark, I think I'm losing my fucking mind," Zack said.

"Asshole. Say something romantic. Or at least sexy."

"I can't form thoughts, damn it, look what you're doing to me."

"You are doing it."

"No, this is you. You are like some drug. You should carry a mandatory death penalty."

"What? Shut up," Mark told him. It was obviously a mistake to let Zack talk during sex.

Zack obeyed and fucked him silently. It was strange to have his body guided from inside, stimulated so thoroughly, like he was being touched everywhere at once. When Mark came, Zack kept him quiet with a kiss. The kiss moved from his mouth to his face and back to his mouth. Zack was murmuring stupid things between the kisses, "You're beautiful, you're amazing, oh, Mark." Mark watched him come, felt it inside him, and thanked him.

Mark opened his eyes to Zack's face. Zack had been kissing him to wake him up. Mark accepted one last kiss before he got up. It wasn't very early so he was careful as he sneaked out. It was pure luck that Al didn't catch him.

All morning, Mark felt like the pleasure from last night still suffused him. He knew it was because this was a new experience, but then he reminded himself that it wasn't. It just seemed that way. This wasn't the muted pleasure once the pain went away, but full and complete ecstasy from the first touch until he came, pumped full, completely satisfied. It was a million times better, sweeter, more intense with Zack. Mark had been like a vessel and honey was being poured through him. He had never been more aware that his body was built for pleasure. In Zack's hands, every part of him was new and alive. He had loved feeling Zack's power and being filled by him. He wanted it

to happen again as much as he wanted to be inside Zack and do the same for him.

Chapter 27

The day started out a little cooler than the ones before. The wind stirred up the waves keeping Al out of the water. He was delighted to watch the big waves crash though. As clouds moved over the sky, the sunshine came and went. But when the rain started it seemed sudden. They were chased inside where Al pouted about the weather.

"No fair. It's not supposed to rain on the beach," Al said.

"Ever?" Mark asked him. He kind of liked the look of the rain sweeping over the ocean and dotting the sand on the beach. The rain brought with it a pleasant scent and a coolness to the air. The wind misted him where he stood leaning on the railing of the porch and enjoying the view.

Zack was sitting on the steps with only his feet getting wet from the rain a little. He pulled Al to him so he could hold him in his lap and console him. As Al looked up, Zack kissed his damp forehead. Mark watched as Zack tried to soothe away Al's disappointment. He felt like he should turn away and not torture himself. Seeing them like that made him realized how strong his feelings for the two of them had become. Mark knew without a doubt that he would do anything for Zack and Al.

"See, Mark is sad too," Zack pointed out to his son.

"Come and sit with us, Mark!" Al invited him.

Mark was going to make an excuse, but then he went over and sat on the steps next to Zack. Al reached over and put his hand on Mark's forearm, connecting the three of them as he leaned back against his dad.

"We'll all sit together, watch the rain, and cry," Zack said.

"We won't cry," Al disagreed.

"We won't?"

Al shook his head.

"Then I guess it's not that bad," Zack concluded.

Al sighed looking comfortable. Mark leaned a little against Zack, and Zack took this as an invitation to put his arm around him. Mark felt so good sitting with them. He was glad it was raining and that no one else was around.

Since the rain didn't let up, the three of them got settled on the porch chairs. Each of them was munching on a nectarine.

"Let's tell Mark the story of how we got PJ," Zack suggested to help pass the time.

"I'll tell it," Al volunteered. He told the story in his own rambling way with Zack clarifying his meaning.

Al was little and PJ was even littler when they got her. They found her tangled in some bushes by the convenience store, lost or abandoned. Zack remembered hearing a sad noise and searching for its source. After pushing aside some branches, he saw a little cat face peering at him. They freed her from the bush and fed her some crackers they had just bought. Zack made the mistake of letting Al play with the little, striped cat for too long. When Zack said they would take it to an animal shelter, Al cried.

"But he's ours. We found him." He turned out to be a she, but in every other way Al was right. PJ wasn't theirs yet, but she would be. First Zack wiped Al's tears and his nose. Next, PJ scratched Zack and Al laughed. Then Zack cursed whoever had taught Al the finders keepers rule.

Al did not like the news that they had to take the cat to the vet or "cat doctor" as Zack had explained to Al.

"But why?" Al whined.

"Because I don't want to fill my house with fleas and parasites," Zack told him.

Al didn't understand what this had to do with the cat.

And then they took PJ home to leave hair everywhere and scratch up the furniture.

At bedtime, Al brought the cat into bed with him, and Zack saw that that's how it was going to be from then on. Al was still adjusting to the fact that PJ was a girl. He also insisted that the cat should sleep in

pajamas.

"He can borrow mine," Al said reasonably.

"She," Zack corrected him. "And cats don't need pajamas."

"Yes, they do."

"No. They already have their own pajamas. See the stripey stuff all over her?" Zack ran his fingertips over the cat's fur to show Al.

"You already have PJs on?" Al asked the cat and peered at her face as if he expected an actual answer. There was no answer so Al looked up at his dad. "Daddy, are you sure?" Al asked him, skeptical maybe because the cat wouldn't answer for herself.

"I am sure. I would never let a cat wander around naked." Then Zack had an idea. "Her name can be Pajamas. Cat's Pajamas."

"PJs?"

"Or just PJ," Zack amended.

"PJ. PJ," Al tried out the name. The cat meowed, and he took that to mean that it was a good name.

That night, the kitten fell asleep right under Al's chin.

Zack had never seen Al so happy as the next morning. It was like Al thought that last night might have been a dream. But there was PJ swiping at the folds of his bedspread. She was real. Seeing her, Al was a crazy, happy little kid. Zack couldn't get him to sit still for breakfast or for anything. Thank God it was Saturday morning, or Zack would have had to call in sick and keep Al home too. He spent all weekend reminding him that they would need to go to work and preschool Monday and leave PJ at home. He still had to drag Al out of the house bodily on Monday. He probably didn't stop talking about his cat the whole day.

PJ was so small then, but she grew so quickly. It hurt Zack to see it. She was only a cat, but Al was growing fast too. So far PJ hadn't grown up to be serious and aloof like some cats, she stayed playful and friendly, for a cat anyway. After Al was asleep, she would sometimes come to watch TV with Zack. If he sprawled on the couch, she would lie on his chest. But she was Al's cat, without a doubt and only on loan to Zack.

Mark found that it was strange to be alone in his bed again after sleeping with Zack. The rain and wind picked up just after Al went to bed. Zack was worried that the storm might knock out the power. He didn't want Al to wake up in the darkness with wind and thunder scaring him and find Mark's bed empty and Zack's door locked. Mark agreed especially since Al didn't have PJ with him. He tried to put out of his mind that this was their last night at the beach house. Since he had trouble sleeping, he looked in on Al. The storm didn't wake him up. Instead of going back to bed, Mark went out onto the porch. The chairs had been stashed inside so they wouldn't blow away with the wind. The waves were high and loud as they crashed. It was exhilarating.

"You're a storm junkie," Zack accused him as he came out to join him. He had seen Mark smiling. Mark turned his smiling face to him, and they kissed. Mark put his arm around him and Zack leaned into him. They stood like that for a while and sometimes kissed. When Zack went to check on Al, Mark went to bed. He found that he could sleep now. The storm was dying down. Its sounds were now soothing. And he could still smell the damp scent of Zack's skin and hair, taste his salty kiss as the wind drove the rain under their shelter.

Chapter 28

The sun was out again the next morning and the storm had made a mess of the beach. Seaweed was everywhere along with other random stuff that washed up. Worried about sharp objects that might have been deposited by the waves, Mark insisted that Al wear his sandals. Zack applauded his caution. The waves were still too high for Al to go swimming so he stood in shallow water and let the big waves splash him. Zack and Mark took turns swimming out briefly. Zack had gone out first, but it was only when Mark took his turn that he realized that the sight of him lost under the crashing waves could be so frightening. Al kept a close eye on Mark as he swam too.

"He’s a really good swimmer, remember?" Zack reminded him.

Al agreed with a nod but never took his eyes off Mark. He must have watched Zack that way too, and he was sorry that he had worried him.

Mark came back in. The rest of the time, Al went exploring through the flotsam and jetsam. As he and Mark kept a close eye on him, Zack became aware of all the worries swirling around between the three of them. It gave him a strange sense of unity. Along with everything else, they worried together.

Zack regretted that he and Mark couldn’t spend their last night at the beach house in his bed. He was surprised that Mark took it so well, but maybe he shouldn’t have been. Though Mark seemed a little crazy in bed, otherwise he was perfectly sensible. Still, Zack wasn’t sure if Mark would expect things to go on the same way at home. Of course Zack didn’t know what to expect either.

After lunch, Zack was planning to get the beach look off his face. He was going to get a shave and a haircut at that little barbershop by the old hotel. That was how he always ended the beach vacation. Al would go with him and get a haircut and a pretend shave. This time Mark was going too. Al had given him that one sloppy shave, but Zack ran his hand over his face, knowing that he didn't look like a million bucks. Which is what Mark did look like. Zack was older but even at Mark's age he wouldn't have been able to compete. Of course he wasn't competing with Mark. He was competing with everyone else

who was out there, and Mark could have any of them. For how long would he settle for Zack?

They had their shave and haircut outing. Al walked out of the barbershop both proud and self-conscious of his new haircut. Then he got distracted and forgot all about it. They strolled for a while before getting back to put the house in order. There would be a cleaning lady coming, but Zack wanted to make sure to leave the place presentable. He and Mark straightened and picked up while Al bothered them. At one point he climbed on the couch and then jumped on Zack's back.

"Al, cleaning is not a contact sport," Zack said as he deposited Al back on the couch.

"It's boring."

"Did you like coming to the beach?" Zack asked him.

Al nodded.

"If we leave the place messy, Yuka's parents won't let us come back," Zack said while cupping Al's face.

"Come and tell me if you see any dust bunnies," Mark said inviting Al to look under the furniture. Al crawled on the floor and spotted dust bunnies for Mark to sweep up and told him when he missed any. With Al busy, Zack and Mark exchanged some looks which hovered between hope, sorrow, and need.

Even with all the little things that needed to be done to distract him, Mark felt an incredible fear gripping him as they were about to leave. He walked through the beach house one final time to make sure they didn't forget anything. At the door to Zack's room his jaw clenched. They were leaving paradise, and he was so afraid that this might be the end.

As Mark stepped outside again, Zack and Al called him over for some last minute pictures. They all stood with their backs to the ocean and the sky. Then they took some pictures with the beach house in the background. Zack told him to smile. Mark took some deep breaths, focused on the smell of the sea air. Pushing away his fear, he decided that he wouldn't let it end and smiled.

Chapter 29

When they arrived back home, Al practically jumped out of the car and rushed in to greet PJ. He hugged her as she pawed at him and licked him.

"It was Dad's fault we had to leave you," Al told the cat like he was afraid she would blame him.

"She was safer here. We explained this to you," Mark told him, sticking up for Zack.

"She was lonely," Al claimed.

"Well she's happy now," Zack said as he brought in some of their bags, not liking that he was the villain once again.

For a while they were busy unpacking and catching up with things that went undone while they were on vacation. Their normal lives would resume the next day. Zack just wasn't sure what that meant now. On the surface, there was nothing different between him and Mark. But soon enough appearances were proven wrong. Their first kiss back home was sudden. Zack felt his mouth on Mark's again and he moaned. His mind and body agreed that this was something he couldn't live without. Mark's arms were around his neck and his waist like a vice, strong, permanent, never letting go. Zack was pulling him closer even though there was no closer.

Zack couldn't swear who had started it. They were in the kitchen. Al was in his room or the living room. Merely standing in the same room, in the next moment, they were kissing, moaning into each other's mouths. Afraid he would get hard, Zack let go. He only shook his head. Mark must not have taken it as meaning anything more than "not now" because he wasn't angry at Zack. Mark turned back to the kitchen counter and continued looking over the work he needed to turn in for his class tomorrow. Zack left him alone without telling him what his no really meant.

After he went to bed, Zack was both relieved and painfully disappointed when Mark didn't come to him. He wondered if Mark had understood him after all.

In many ways things were the same as before they went on vacation. It was Saturday and Mark and Al had gone to the store. They were back and playing with the dominoes they had bought. Zack loved how Mark was always thinking up fun things to do with Al.

"How many packs did you get?" Zack asked watching them set them up.

"Two packs." Mark looked up at him already knowing what he had in mind.

"Oh, come on. Get more. We'll clear the living room and set them up. It will be hours of fun."

Though Mark might have understood his plan, Al didn't.

"What does Dad want?" Al asked Mark like he was his translator.

"Am I spoiling your fun?" Zack asked seeing that he was being treated like an intruder.

"No. You can play too," Al offered generously. "You can sit there." Al pointed to a spot on the carpet next to him.

"What a nice boy," Zack said as he sat down, and Al smiled at the compliment.

As Al turned back to the dominoes, Zack touched his head and gazed at him. Al squirmed a little shyly then pushed at him to get him to stop embarrassing him in front of Mark. Of course Mark had that sweet look he reserved for when Zack was affectionate with Al.

After they had arranged the dominoes, Al got the honor of setting them in motion so they would all be knocked down. To Al's delight, most of it fell over, but after a turn, one section stayed up. Al looked at Mark, who nodded his permission. Al went over and made the uncooperative bunch of dominoes fall over too. After they gathered up the dominoes in a pile again, Mark suggested they make a spiral. Just as they were starting on it, Al noticed that PJ wasn't there to watch the construction and went off searching for her.

As they waited for Al to come back, Zack felt the closeness between him and Mark that had only grown since they went on vacation. But he didn't dare look at him.

"My dad used to play with me just like this," Mark said. He confessed it almost like it was wrong to try to recapture the good feelings from his childhood with Al. Then he changed the subject. "I thought we might build a house of cards too. I bought some extra playing cards."

"I'd like to see that," Zack said doubting Al's patience for such delicate work. Then he addressed what Mark had told him. "I'm sure there are a lot of good things you remember about your parents," Zack said.

"But now all the memories of them have this grimy film on them. It's like the future went and screwed up the past," Mark said.

"Does it help to play with Al like you used to when you were a kid?"

"Kind of. But mainly I was desperate to give Al something to do since you don't want him playing video games," Mark said.

"You are just dying to sit him in front of a nice first person shooter, have him mow down some zombies," Zack accused him.

"You would never hear a peep out of him ever again," Mark said, seriously tempting Zack. But Zack was sure Mark didn't want to turn Al's brain into mush any more than he did.

That evening after dinner, Mark was on the computer, and Zack was hiding from him in his office. Even though he knew he wouldn't be able to avoid Mark forever, he had not prepared himself for dealing with the consequences of what happened between them. To give him credit, Mark was giving him a breather, but Zack knew it wouldn't last. They would have to deal with what they started at the beach house soon. And there was no doubt in his mind that something had started there.

Zack busied himself with getting Al to bed. But Zack only half listened to Al arguing with the cat as he thought about Mark. He wondered if Mark noticed that he avoided touching him since they came back. Maybe that was not right either. What was wrong with a casual touch? But if he needed to touch him so badly, then the touch wasn't casual. He had to keep his hands off. But it wasn't just up to him. Once Mark made his move, Zack didn't know how he could manage to resist him. But he had to. Mark was too young to commit to a family. And as long as he ended things now, Al wouldn't be hurt, only Zack.

With Al's voice in his ear, Zack told himself all the right things. As he saw Mark, all that would go out of his head, and he would want to do

all the wrong things. Zack was reminded of that as he stood in the kitchen and remembered their reckless kiss. Turning to find Mark standing by the fridge, watching him, Zack felt flustered, like he had been caught doing something. As long as Mark was in the same room with him, he couldn't hope to recover his composure. He tried to leave. Mark put out his arm to stop him. He didn't touch him or block his way, just drew his attention, like hailing a cab. Zack stopped.

"Are you putting on a cold and uncaring act? I can't quite tell because you are so bad at it," Mark asked him.

"I'm trying to maintain some distance." Zack hadn't realized that's how it came across. He had tried his best to act normal.

"Well stop being weird about it," Mark told him so obviously Zack had failed.

"I thought since you hadn't made a move that you understood." That was a lie, but he hoped to talk Mark out of making a move now.

"You mean you thought I gave you up? No. I was just demonstrating a little restraint. I know I kind of jumped you at the beach house. I didn't want you to think I didn't have any self-control," he explained then added, "You're not off the hook."

This was exactly what Zack was afraid of. If Mark was against him, he didn't stand a chance. Zack had blundering into a sexual relationship that threatened to engulf him. He tried to swallowed his emotions, but they were still there barely held in check, just waiting to overwhelm him. Without Mark helping him to hold them back, it was hopeless. Zack sighed in frustration. He didn't know how to make Mark understand.

"So I make you uncomfortable now? Should I be looking for another job?" Mark asked, shocking Zack.

"God, no." Zack was horrified at the thought, but Mark just kept pushing along the same lines.

"Another place to live?"

"No! We just need to back away from any physical involvement," Zack said desperately. The thought that Mark might leave scared him to death.

"So we should just torment each other emotionally? Or are you going

to say that things between us were purely physical?" Mark challenged him, and Zack couldn't lie about it.

"No. We just need to use better judgment."

"What better judgment? As far as I can see you're just making us miserable for no reason," Mark pointed out.

"It's not for no reason. I have Al to think of," Zack reminded him.

"I am not bad for Al," Mark asserted, looking a little hurt.

"I didn't say that," Zack protested.

"I just don't fit into your family."

"I never said that either." That was the furthest thing from the truth. Mark fit perfectly. Again Zack tried to explain himself though Mark seemed determined to misunderstand him. "I never meant to hurt you but..."

"Don't throw me away then," Mark said in a matter of fact way.

"Come on, that's not fair," Zack told him. With Mark's history with his parents, that was a low blow. "Just help me keep things under control," Zack pleaded with him.

Mark looked angry for a moment, but then got a determined look.

"Under control? OK," he said a little enigmatically.

As Mark walked away, Zack wasn't sure what he meant. He had either agreed to what Zack wanted or to some plan of his own.

Earlier that day, after classes, Mark had visited Sari at her apartment, which she shared with three other girls. He brought her an offering of greasy finger-foods so she hugged him twice.

"So how was the family vacation?" she asked him.

Mark smiled not sure how he would answer her, but his look told her plenty.

"Not so wholesome judging from your face. So who did you diddle? The baby daddy or some surfer dude maybe?" She wiggled her eyebrows.

"Zack. But now I find myself in a ‘What happened at the beach house stays at the beach house’ situation," Mark admitted.

Sari shrugged as she chewed.

"Isn’t it just as well? You don’t want to get all tied down to some guy with a kid," Sari said then she saw the look on Mark’s face.

"Oh my God! You do!" she realized. "Are you crazy?"

"I know what I want," Mark said defensively.

"Do you really? Have you actually thought this through? Playing house is bound to get old pretty fast. Live a little before you settle down to a life of domestic drudgery."

Mark glared at her. He didn’t enjoy having yet one more person telling him that what he wanted wasn’t right for him. Of course, Sari was projecting her own preferences on him. If a guy she liked had a kid, she would run. Most people their age would.

Mark was determined to convince Zack to take him seriously despite his age. At times, at low moments, Mark felt his confidence wane and wondered why he had been so sure of himself and Zack. He would look around him at this strange, old fashioned house full of other people’s memories and doubt himself. But the place also anchored him. Here he felt accepted. He felt like he belonged.

He felt most confident when Zack was there. Even his half hearted rejection seemed to confirm the strength of their bond. Mark was more alive when he was with Zack, even when he was arguing with him, he felt sure and strong. Everything about Zack told him that he would never let him down.

But Zack had already gone to bed, and Mark stood in a dark, empty hallway. Zack was behind the door to his bedroom, so close. Mark put his hand on the doorknob. He knew it wasn’t locked, but he couldn’t make himself open it. He had done it that first time, gone in without so much as a knock. But now it seemed wrong. He just stood there. His decision was made, but he couldn’t walk away yet. Knowing he wouldn’t be with Zack again tonight, he waited for the pain in his chest to subside. Then he heard his name. He heard it faintly so maybe it was just wishful thinking.

"Mark?"

Mark knocked.

"Come in."

Zack had heard Mark stop outside the door. He held his breath expecting him to walk in, but he didn't until he called his name. Mark opened the door and stepped in looking sullen. After closing it, he stayed by the door almost like he was expecting to be told off.

"For god's sake," Zack said a little exasperated.

"I'm sorry," Mark said confirming what Zack thought.

"No. You can come in. It's OK. It's always OK."

Mark walked over to Zack's bed and stood over him. Zack noticed that he looked more like himself now.

"You're sending me mixed messages," Mark said. He showed no hesitation now. The look on his face said that he was trying to understand Zack and what he really wanted.

Zack moved a little so Mark could sit on the bed. He sat and waited for Zack to explain himself.

"I don't want you to ever think that I'm not here for you," Zack told him.

"As a friend?" Mark asked.

Zack shook his head.

"In every way," Zack admitted.

"And you wonder why I'm confused."

"I don't wonder. I need time."

"Do you want me to stay away from you?"

Zack could tell that Mark was afraid he would say yes. Before Mark even finished asking the question, Zack shook his head again.

"No. I don't want distance. I don't want ..." Zack gestured toward the door to refer to how Mark had stopped outside afraid that he wasn't welcome. Zack tried to say more, but he couldn't explain. He looked

at Mark for help.

"I'll find a middle ground," Mark said, almost vowed.

"I know it's not fair..."

"Don't worry about it. We'll figure it out." Mark sounded so confident and irresistible, nothing like the downcast guy who had walked in, not sure if he was wanted.

Zack beamed at him then pulled him into a hug. "You're wonderful," he said as he tangled his hands through Mark's hair and kissed him.

"You didn't lock the door," Zack realized and jumped out of bed to lock it himself. As he turned back to the bed, he told Mark, "You need to have more confidence. Like I would let you leave this room without getting some."

Mark gave him a "shut up" look. He was already stripping off his clothes. Zack watched as his hard-on came into view, still trapped inside his boxers. Mark saw his eyes glued to his cock. As Mark spread his legs to make room for him, Zack kneeled. He rubbed his face against the boxers, smelling Mark and feeling the column of hard flesh he was dying for. Pulling off Mark's boxers, Zack now buried his face in Mark's lap with nothing between him and what he wanted. His tongue played with every inch of Mark's cock making him pant. With a moan, Zack let the cock slide into his mouth. He didn't know how he had ever lived without this. As he let Mark's balls rest in his hand, Zack sucked gently so Mark wouldn't come too soon. He enjoyed just those sensations for a while, but then his own cock needed to be freed and handled. Knowing that it belonged to Mark now, he stood up. He let Mark pull the drawstring and pull down his pajama bottoms and take what was his. He felt Mark's strong hands on his ass guiding his whole body to bring the stiff cock to his mouth.

After giving Zack's cock some much needed attention, Mark got him to go on all fours on the bed. Zack lowered his head to the mattress and moaned as Mark looked for condoms and lube. Before Mark even touched him, he was breathing hard and clutching the sheets like he needed to anchor himself against his own uncontrollable desires. When Mark's fingers pressed into him, he felt like he would jump out of his skin. If he had let himself go, he would have come. But he fought for control, and he most definitely did not touch himself.

Mark's weight on the mattress, his shifting into position made Zack moan again in anticipation. Accepting the invitation of that moan,

Mark placed one hand on his ass and used the other one to guide himself in. As Mark pushed in, Zack's body screamed with pleasure while Zack grit his teeth on the sounds he had to hold back. He breathed hard as Mark rested inside him while running his hands up and down his back.

"I missed you so much," Mark said, and Zack reached back with both hands to caress him.

Mark hadn't meant to say that. But being inside Zack again was so amazing, he couldn't stop himself. Now Zack's hands squeezed Mark's thighs more and more urgently. He knew Zack wanted to be fucked. As he pulled back then shoved in again, Mark watched Zack's body respond to every inch. Since Zack had fucked him, Mark felt different as he moved inside him. He felt a feedback of Zack's pleasure, like he could feel what Zack felt. For the first time, his joy in fucking someone was complete. He now knew how good it felt to be fucked. He knew that fucking Zack was a something he was doing for both of them.

The pounding of his heart and the pounding of his body against Zack were deafening in Mark's ears. Zack pushed back to meet Mark's thrusts as they increased in speed and power. Zack was frenzied as he drove his body into Mark's. Slippery with sweat, Zack was hard to hold onto, but they fit too perfectly, moved like one and came with low grunts that took the place of all the noise they wanted to make but couldn't. Now only the crazy pounding of Mark's heart remained. He slumped over Zack's back, moaning with relief and regret that it was over. Zack dropped flat on the bed. Free of the grip of Zack's body Mark fell next to him. They each put one arm around the other, too exhausted to do more. Mark felt heavy and satisfied. He had felt Zack's insatiable hunger for him. It was almost frightening. Mark laughed. He loved that Zack went crazy over him. Even if it wasn't true, he wanted to think that Zack couldn't resist him.

Mark didn't know that he fell asleep until he woke up. Next to him, Zack stretched and yawned with abandon as Mark enjoyed the show. Mark could just live off the sight of Zack's naked body, never eat or sleep just drink him in with his eyes. Mark leaned down to kiss the slight dip in the center of his rib cage.

Chapter 30

Zack never marked the occasion, but he was always aware of it. It was the anniversary of the day Kelly died. This was the day when his failure to help Kelly weighed on him the most. Though Zack didn't do anything different, Mark noticed his mood. He distracted Al in the evening as Zack wallowed in memories. After Al was in bed, Mark came over to him. Before he even asked, Zack told him about the significance of that day.

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Kelly refused to be taken to the hospital. The dark circles under her eyes deepened, and the pallor of her skin intensified. Then she was in bed, not moving except for her eyes. They always searched for Al. Whenever she was awake, Zack would hold him where she could see him.

"Don't worry. You're doing good," she whispered to him. Then even though it was difficult for her to speak, she added, "Don't let it go to your head. You're still a dork."

It took her a while to get her breath back after saying that, but from her expression, Zack could tell it was worth it.

But she couldn't keep herself going. Her eyes grew empty well before she stopped breathing. She stayed like that for hours. It was like some vital part of her expired before her body gave out, and those last few breaths were for nothing.

Al crying was the last thing she heard before she was gone. Zack hoped that hearing him cry didn't worry her. But she probably knew it was Al sensing the terrible thing that was happening, the loss of his mother. His little heart knew that something was going wrong in his young life that could never be set right.

Zack kept holding her hand as Al's crying grew louder in his awareness. He didn't remember going to him, only standing with him already in his arms. Holding him, Zack could feel a new strength

inside himself despite the terrible grief that threatened to knock him to the ground. Al was warmth and life and the first one who held Zack. Together they consoled each other as they cried.

***

"I never tell Al what this day means," Zack told Mark as they sat together on the couch. "I don't want him to dwell on her death. I don't want to set aside even one day of his life for sadness. But it doesn't seem right. I guess when he's older, I'll let him know. It's funny. I want to ask Kelly what I should say to him about today. That doesn't make any sense does it?" Zack looked at Mark. He was holding Zack's hand.

"You don't need anyone to tell you what you should do. When Al is old enough, you'll know, and you'll know what to tell him."

"I guess one of us has confidence in my parenting skills," Zack said.

"You don't think you can really substitute for her, do you?" Mark asked seeing how unsure Zack was.

"I can't. I mean, how can I?"

"OK. That's true. But only because no one can take the place of another person. You're not a substitute. Just know that no one could be a better parent than you."

"Kelly would have been. She would have aced it. She and Al, they would have been connected, they... they...there are just no words."

Mark interrupted him while he struggled for a way to express his doubts.

"There are no words for what you and Al share either. Unless you consider father and son words."

"OK, OK. But I can't shake the feeling that I'm always failing Al and Kelly and everyone. I mean, Al is a great kid. He could do a lot better than me. He could have his pick of fathers."

"You're just crazy," Mark concluded giving up on talking sense to him. Smart move. But he wasn't really giving up. He straddled Zack and

made himself comfortable on his lap. "Be the best crazy parent you can be for Al. You won't know how crappy you've been until Al is twenty and you count his piercings and tattoos."

The thought of his little boy mutilating his body was horrifying to Zack. After a long moment of speechlessness, he could only say one thing to Mark, "You are evil."

"It was too much trouble trying to make you feel better," Mark said as he stood up. "It's easier to drive a crazy person crazy than to make them sane."

Mark went to the kitchen and left Zack smiling. He came back with some cold drinks for the two of them. They stayed up late wrapped in each other's arms on the couch. Most of the time, they didn't say anything. But whenever Zack felt like talking, Mark listened like he was absorbing his whole life. Zack insisted on hearing a story from Mark's childhood. He heard how Mark and his cousins all learned to swim together then raced each other across the lake. Zack fell asleep picturing Mark's memories.

Zack and Al came home to a broken air conditioner. Every fan in the house was on, and Zack opened some windows to create a breeze. When Mark came home, he found Zack and Al sitting on the couch in front of the oscillating fan which alternately cooled one of them then the other.

"They'll be here tomorrow to fix it," Zack said immediately. "Come and sit with us."

Mark brought his dinner into the living room, and they sat with Al in the middle. As long as Al was there, everything was wholesome and innocent. Maybe there was an occasional glance at sweat dripping down the side of Mark's neck to disappear inside his collar or at the moisture on his upper lip.

Though he couldn't imagine wanting to do anything strenuous in this heat, Zack had a feeling he would anyway. But first he had to send Al to bed.

When Zack got back, Mark was sitting in front of the fan, working on his laptop. He ignored Zack as he sat down next to him. Taking Mark's hand, he found it was sweaty. Zack ran his fingers over the wet palm. Mark breathed in.

"You're tickling me," he said. He never looked away from his computer screen. As Zack reached down to feel the bulge in his shorts, Mark threw his head back. Zack loved that he could arouse him so easily. Mark's sweaty palm went around Zack's neck, rubbing his neck then digging his fingers through his hair as he panted.

"I need to finish this and send it in," Mark said without looking at him then he let go of Zack with a sigh. He removed Zack's hand from his crotch decisively.

Rejected, Zack retreated to his office. Mark had told him he needed to revise an assignment at the last minute, but Zack's mind was clouded with heat and lust. He couldn't help it. He was always anticipating the next time they touched, craving it.

Hearing the shower running in Mark's bathroom an hour later, Zack decided to take one too. Afterward, he went to make sure Al was sleeping. His ceiling fan was keeping him cool, and Zack gazed at him for a while. He came out to find Mark standing by the screen of the open glass doors. A chorus of crickets could be heard outside along with the rustling of leaves in the slight breeze. The sounds of traffic were further away and easy to ignore. The way Mark was standing there reminded Zack of those nearly obscene ads, the kind that make you overlook whatever is being advertised while you ogle the hot body of the model. Mark had taken just that kind of pose. His fly was partly undone, his t-shirt was raised. But Zack was pretty sure he could figure out what Mark was advertising.

After coming out of the shower, Mark decided not to button his fly all the way. He leaned by the glass door and pulled his t-shirt up to let the breeze cool his chest. Eventually Zack found him like that. Mark gave him a "come get me" look, but Zack kept his distance.

"Mark," Zack said as if scolding him for indecent behavior.

"I'm just standing here cooling off. If you are having a hard time, that's your problem."

Zack went up to him. Mark opened his mouth and closed his eyes. He inhaled Zack's smell. He slid down wanting to kneel in front of Zack, but Zack pulled him back up.

"No," Mark said in protest too loudly.

"Shhh," Zack said. He cupped Mark's face.

Mark felt his lips part again, for a kiss, for a cock, for anything of Zack's. He wanted to seduce him. He wanted that very badly. Zack was looking at Mark's mouth as if mesmerized. His thumb played over Mark's lips, found the space between them. Mark opened his mouth more, but Zack only pushed in the edge of his thumb to rub against Mark's soft, wet inner lip. Mark licked him. Zack's skin tasted good. It didn't have the salt sea taste. It was all Zack now.

Mark licked and drew the thumb into his mouth. Zack removed it reluctantly and pulled Mark away from the open door. He closed it and locked it then took Mark to his room. He pushed Mark's body into the door until it closed. Mark locked it as Zack undid the rest of the buttons of Mark's fly. He let Mark's cock pop free and kneeled down. Zack unzipped his own fly as he took Mark's cock into his mouth.

Zack made it clear that he wanted to be fucked, and Mark was glad to be the man chosen for the job. They established a slow rhythm. Zack jerked and trust back as Mark pushed forward. He watched how lightly Zack handled himself. In contrast, he could see his muscles tense and bunch up with the need to come to impale himself, to make Mark ride him like a beast. Mark loved Zack's control.

"I want to make you feel good," Mark whispered meaning so much more than that.

"I don't want it to end. I never want it to end," Zack said and threw his head back, willing himself to hold off. His throat stretched then worked to keep back a cry as Zack opened his mouth but still refused to come.

Mark moaned seeing him like that.

"Oh, Zack. Please come," Mark begged.

Zack laughed and lowered his forehead down to the mattress.

"No. I want to wait for you." Zack's voice was a little muffled, but his words were clear.

Mark choked back the words "I love you". He felt a nearly physical pain mix with his own need to come, and he moaned. Zack turned his head. Mark came just as Zack said his name. Zack came with a surprised look and a cry he quickly cut off. He shuddered as Mark dropped on top of him. Mark had meant to lower himself down gently but his muscles had other plans, like checking out on him. Now he

was dead weight and sweaty on top of Zack's own sweaty, limp body. Zack turned carefully to ease Mark off him.

"What a gentleman," Mark teased him. He really was, down to his core. Mark again felt the welling up of feeling, the need to tell him that he was loved. Instead he just looked sad drawing Zack's concern. Zack poked his chin.

"What's this?"

He looked at Zack, wondering if he could tell what Mark was feeling, if maybe he felt something too. Another wave of sadness washed through him over those unsaid words.

Zack didn't press him for an explanation for his mood. He lay on his back and pulled Mark close to lie against him.

"You're too hairy. It's like having a blanket over me," Mark complained. He didn't really mind, but he felt too much like he was being comforted.

"I'd let you shave me from head to toe," Zack said. He sounded serious.

"That would take days."

"I was being romantic," Zack claimed.

"OK. Then I admit I like you the way you are," Mark said, being a little romantic in return. But he had to ask, "Aren't you hot?" This was a lot of body contact for an unairconditioned house when the breeze had died down. Zack turned and kissed him lightly.

"We could be on fire, and I'd still want to hold you," Zack said with a melancholy, deep look in his eyes.

That sounded so heartfelt and romantic until Mark actually thought about it.

"Now you have me thinking about burn victims and charred flesh. And in this heat. You are just the worst at this," Mark groused but still rested his head on Zack shoulder. He also couldn't stop smiling. Zack had sounded so sincere when he said that stupid thing about being on fire. Instead of that earlier sadness, Mark now felt a crazy, giddy happiness.

Chapter 31

More and more, Zack felt the urging of his own heart to announce his relationship with Mark. The need to tell everyone about the two of them was particularly strong as he spoke to Louise.

"And no, Mark has not abandoned us yet," Zack updated her

"So you're still not getting on Mark's nerves? He must be a saint."

Zack was going to object, but he had to agree.

"He is, actually."

"Oh my God, you're smitten," she concluded from that scant evidence "I want a picture. Right now. Send it."

"Sorry. I don't have any," Zack lied and made a counteroffer. "I can send you a picture of PJ halfway inside my shoe."

"I've seen that picture of PJ's butt. I want Mark. Go snap a picture right now."

He did snap a picture and sent it right away.

"That's you giving me a finger, you jerk."

Zack laughed.

"Come and visit then you can get an eyeful of Mark," he told her.

"I just might," she threatened. But it would be nice to see her. It had been more than a year since her last visit.

"You don’t look so bad you know," she said. She must have been taking a close look at his picture. "But you will not be looking this good for long, you know. You need to secure yourself a man to tie down for your future, declining years."

"For my future pudgy self?"

"Exactly."

"When I get pudgy, I'll go fuck pudgy guys."

"Even those guys want to fuck hot guys. No one will want you," she predicted.

"Remind me what this is about again. Destroying my ego?"

"It's about getting you out there. Are you a monk? Did you take a vow of celibacy?"

"I'm hardly celibate. I just don't waste my time on nonessentials."

"Like talking to a guy or, God forbid, dating."

"Waste of time and an even bigger waste of time," Zack told her.

After he got off the phone with Louise, Zack wasn't sure, but Mark might have been glaring at him. It didn't last long. Now Mark had his eyes back on the laptop screen. He was at the kitchen table working on something for school. Zack sat opposite him. He was pretty sure Mark could hear his conversation with Louise, but he didn't think he had said anything that should piss off Mark. But maybe not telling his best friend that he already had a man in his life was enough.

"Did you want me to tell her about us?" Zack asked. He was prepared to call her back and do it and then swear her to secrecy of course.

"I don't care what you tell her," Mark said sounding pissed.

"You obviously do."

He was silent for a minute.

"You could have at least hinted that you met someone."

"That would satisfy you?"

"No." Mark thought about it. "I don't like being a secret. Again." He looked up at Zack.

"That's below the belt, Mark."

"I know. But it's also the truth."

"You are not a secret. This is only about Al. You told me yourself that Al wants you to be his second dad. He will..."

"I know I'm overreacted. But it doesn't feel good to be hidden away."

Zack knew Mark was right. He was still introducing Mark as the nanny when in reality Mark was his boyfriend. The thought made Zack smile.

"Have you been a boyfriend before?" Zack asked Mark.

"No," Mark admitted then he continued. "Thanks so much for making me your secret boyfriend, Zack. You're so awesome," Mark mocked him.

"You're such a bitch," Zack said though he knew he deserved it. Then he added, "But I still like you."

Zack got up and went to stand behind Mark. He started kneading his shoulder's gently. Mark rolled his head back and forth.

"I can tell Louise. It won't get back to Al," Zack offered.

But if Zack thought that was an easy way to satisfy Mark, It didn't work.

"I don't care about that. I only care that you acknowledge we're together. When might that happen?" he leaned back and looked up to give Zack a hard stare.

Zack didn't know the answer. But as Zack kneaded, he felt a little of the tension leaving Mark's shoulders. Mark leaned back until he rested the back of his head against Zack. He sighed then moaned as Zack slowly upped the pressure he was applying.

"I like how you do that. I like how you're building up," Mark mumbled. His words were slurred like he was under the influence.

After making sure they couldn't be seen, Zack kissed him on the mouth.

Zack liked how Mark climbed into his bed, without hesitation. He knew he belonged there even after an argument or maybe especially after an argument. At his approach, Zack's breath caught in his throat, and he rubbed a hand over Mark's thighs as he kneeled on the bed. He was leaning in slowly until Mark pushed him back, laid him out flat and kissed him thoroughly. They rolled around, kissing and taking off each other's clothes. Mark then took charge of Zack's cock. He held the base firmly and licked the rest lovingly while maintaining eye

contact with Zack. Shifting his hold to Zack's balls, he sucked on the head then swirled it with his tongue. After he drove Zack crazy with need, Mark started sucking hard until Zack's come flooded his mouth.

Zack leaned back with a satisfied smile on his face.

"Don't get comfy. There's still one cock outstanding," Mark reminded him.

"But now I'm sleepy and not really interested," Zack joked.

Mark slowly drew his hand over his own cock and smirked at Zack. Zack did his best to ignore the action, but that was impossible. Zack reached for his cock, but Mark evaded him.

"No. Relax. I got this," he said to Zack and kept stroking.

"Shut up," Zack said as he made another grab for him with no success. Mark was quicker while still not letting go of his own cock. Zack didn't even break his rhythm.

"Rest up. At your age..." Mark started to say.

"Give me that thing," Zack demanded.

"I wouldn't want to overtire you." His stroked were firm and slow designed to show off his beautiful cock.

"OK. I've learned my lesson. Now let me have that before you waste it."

Mark laughed at his desperation and reached out to him, letting Zack pull him close. They kissed for a little bit then Zack bent down to Mark's hard cock. Zack swallowed hard and turned his attention to Mark's balls first while handling the shaft gently. Ready to take Mark's cock in his mouth, he held Mark steady. When he put his hands on Mark's hips, he felt Mark's hands cover his. Mark slid his hands down drawing them over Zack's arms. Zack reached higher so Mark's hands could travel the length of his arm and Zack in turn could caress his chest.

Mark's dark head was nestled against his arm as Zack stroked his hair and they gazed at each other. Zack couldn't guess about himself, but Mark's expression said contentment, peace. Zack felt like he could be swallowed by that look. Mark blinked slowly then fell asleep. Zack

now gazed at his face instead. Stubble darkened his chin slightly. His mouth was a little open. Zack had to resist kissing him. Asleep or awake, Mark was just too much of a temptation.

Holding Mark as he slept, Zack tried to think if he had ever felt this way. He had to skip over every quickie experience since he became a father. They were the equivalent of his old college, men's room encounter or two, behind him now, thank God. That's when Zack would simply indulge his libido with some guy. The encounter left him with a feeling of a simple need satisfied, like having a drink when you're thirsty. Now he felt like the need in him was bottomless, impossible to fulfill. Zack thought about his two college boyfriends, nice, good looking guys. Kirk was more fun than Dale. Kirk made him laugh and played pranks on him all the time. Dale was often too serious but sexy as hell. But had Zack felt the way he did with Mark? No. He had not felt this heat suffusing his body and soul. He hadn't felt this tenderness and need never to let go. Mark was like no one else. He was impossible to give up.

As Al walked into the house with big, angry strides, Zack followed after him with a sigh. Mark didn't have a class so he was making dinner. When Zack came to mope on his shoulder, Mark asked him, "What did you do now?"

"Don't convict me already. You've been in my shoes. It's about a damn dog."

"Why is Al obsessed with dogs when he loves PJ?" Mark wondered.

"Because he doesn't have one. Someone was selling puppies near Little Rainbow. There was a sign tacked up right at the intersection with the longest red light in the world. Al had about a million years to figure out that it said puppies for sale. And there's a big arrow pointing the way. Al went crazy telling me to turn. If he could have grabbed the wheel, he would have. He was so mad when I wouldn't do it."

"And you don't want a dog because...?" Mark asked.

"I didn't even want PJ. We told you how we ended up with her," Zack reminded him, but Mark looked skeptical about that.

Mark decided not to play the mediator. He knew Al would let go of his grudge soon enough. When Al came to the dinner table, he stomped past his father. Zack grabbed him and pulled him into a hug. Al only

let his dad hug him a little then he pushed away from him. Zack tried the maneuver again after they ate, and Al was getting out of his chair. He held Al in his lap but failed to win him over.

"I don't like you," Al said refusing to look at him.

"But you know I love you," Zack said consolingly.

Al shook his head.

"No?" Zack tickled him a little then let him play with PJ and pout.

Zack sighed and Mark took his hand.

"Hey, I need more consolation than that," Zack said and leaned over for a kiss.

It was a soft kiss, but it lasted too long. Even though they were both leaning over the table to meet half way, it was like they didn't know how to stop. In private, they would stop to move on to doing something else. But the only reason they had to stop now was not to get caught.

"At least it would distract him from that puppy you didn't buy him," Mark said when Zack looked behind him to make sure they hadn't been seen.

They took care of the dishes together then Mark got on his laptop, and Zack went to his office. It wasn't long though before Al made a move of his own. First he peeked into the office and watched his father at his desk. Then he crept in while Zack pretended not to notice his approach. Finally, Al popped up from behind the desk and went over to lean on Zack. His father helped him climb into his lap.

"So you like me now?" Zack asked.

Al denied it with a shake of his head. Seeing what his dad was doing on the computer, Al pronounced it boring.

"Let's look at a movie," Zack suggested.

"Real movie?" Al asked eagerly.

"No, a home movie," Zack told him.

Al was disappointed until the movie started playing. Then he laughed at whatever was happening on the screen.

Zack looked up to see Mark watching them from the doorway.

"He's laughing at you," Zack told him.

Mark went over to see. It was the video of Mark dancing with PJ then pretending to fall down and wrestle with her. He could hear Zack on the video saying, "He's weak. Get him, PJ!"

Mark found himself wondering how long this could last. How long would he get to be a part of this? Though they looked different, he could see that Zack and Al belonged to each other. Mark didn't belong anywhere or to anyone. Maybe that's why he was so desperate to be with Zack and to be a real part of their family. Maybe Zack could see that desperation, and that's why he didn't trust his feelings.

"Show him the one when you tried to eat my toes," Al demanded.

Zack clicked on a video labeled Nibbletoes. It showed baby Al giggling while Zack played with his feet, pretending to bite them.

"See. He tried to eat them," Al accused.

Mark could hear a woman's voice on the video.

"That's Louise's voice," Zack explained.

"If this kid wakes up without his toes one day, we'll know what happened," she said though she stayed behind the camera.

Zack was lightly pinching the baby's toes.

"Look at the little baby piggies. I don't know how anyone can resist biting these little nibblets," Zack said on the video.

"Because they are not cannibals," Louise said.

Zack just waved away that reason. Baby Al on the video gurgled happily, but the real life Al objected to the cannibalism.

"See! See!" Al said pointing at the evidence.

"Do you still have all your toes?" Zack asked him like he was a witness for the defense.

"Yes, I do," Al said.

"You want to keep it that way? They're still little and cute. They're still

bitable," Zack said to him and tickled him.

Even as he laughed Al jumped out of Zack's lap and moved closer to Mark for protection. He then glared at his father.

"Just make sure to grow big, hairy toes. Then he won't want to bite them," Mark told Al, who leaned against him.

"I don't know," Zack mumbled thinking of something completely different.

Mark shushed him while suspecting him of being some kind of toe fetishist.

"I'll grow big hairy feet like a hobbit," Al said enthusiastically.

Mark approved this strategy.

Zack promised that Al would be safe and put him back in his lap so he could see the monitor better. In the next video, Zack was only a voice. Baby Al was a little older in this video.

"Show me your hands!" Zack said on the video.

Baby Al held up his hands, and the real Al did too a little bit but only as a reflex.

"Fingers!" Zack said.

Baby Al wiggled his chubby fingers. The real Al also wiggled his fingers involuntarily.

"Toes!"

Baby Al grabbed his toes.

"Feet!"

Baby Al kicked his feet.

It went on like that with Zack calling out body parts, and baby Al showing off his knowledge of anatomy. Whenever he didn't know the answer, baby Al pointed to his belly button, and the real Al yelled, "No!"

"That's your bellybutton, silly" Zack voice would say to baby Al, and baby Al would point to his bellybutton again. Then Zack would tickle

him with only his hand visible on the screen.

"He doesn’t know anything," Al complained.

"He? That’s you," Zack told him though Al already knew that was him but couldn’t quite accept it. "And you were a smart baby."

"He thinks everything is his belly button. He doesn’t know his elbow. He doesn’t know his shoulder..." Al started listing until Zack tickled him and made him giggle instead.

Zack turned to Mark as Al ran away.

"Would it surprise you to know that I have a video of Al watching this video? Zack asked him.

"Of course you do." By now, Mark was resigned to Zack’s weirdness.

Chapter 32

Al's birthday was coming up, and they were having the party at Jojo's. There would be giant food of every kind. Since the owners of the diner had the big food connections, they were ordering stuff just for the party. After all the arrangements were made, Zack had only one more assignment for Mark.

"Make sure Al knows that I am not getting him a dog. Please. I've tried to make it clear to him, but I don't know. He might think I'm just trying to keep it a secret to surprise him. I don't want him to be disappointed," Zack said.

"I'll talk to him," Mark promised.

It took some convincing, but eventually Al seemed to believe him. That didn't make him any less excited when the big day came.

For the party, Zack had them all wear the new suits they bought for the piano recital but no ties. Mark felt different when they took pictures this time, especially of all three of them. This time the pictures weren't capturing a second of togetherness. These pictures were the future. He just wasn't sure if Zack saw it yet.

Al's birthdays always made Zack a little sad because of everyone who wasn't there with them. But as he aimed the camera, he saw this new thing that had brightened his life. Mark was holding Al. They were cheek to cheek and making faces at the camera. But there were two pictures right before that. As he allowed Mark to pick him up, Al had told him, "It's just for the picture. I'm not a baby." Mark had agreed. That's when Zack snapped a picture of the two of them solemnly looking into each other's eyes as they made their bargain. In the next picture, they turned to Zack but hadn't started making faces yet. They both had on an identical expression of expectancy. With that look they were asking Zack if he was ready, because they were.

Jojo's was noisy with kids and adults having a good time. The tables had all kinds of big foods, especially deserts. A giant burger was cut into wedges for serving while a extra long sub took up half the length of the diner. Dips were served inside giant vegetables. There was an

assortment of oversized fruits. More than one person and kid asked if it was all real. There was a big cake in the shape of the letters A and L, though that was hard to tell now that it had been half eaten. Al's gifts sat in a corner unopened. Though Zack knew that people liked to see the birthday boy open his gifts, he didn't trust Al to be gracious about every gift he got.

To offset the natural birthday boy greed, Zack had ordered little bundles of candy in colorful pouches for Al to give to his guests. He handed the basket filled with them to Al and told him, "Make sure everyone gets one, kids and adults. And when you hand them out make sure to say, 'Thank you for coming to my party. Here's something to rot your teeth.'"

Mark vetoed that and told Al only to say the first part and not the part about rotting teeth. Al handed out the treats eagerly and energetically. Seeing him running around, Mark got worried.

"He'll be exhausted before the night is over."

"He's having fun," Zack assured him.

Then among all the yelling of "Thank you for coming to my party", they heard Al say something different with even more enthusiasm.

"Leon! Pick me up!" Al was shouting.

Leon had just arrived to the party and barely had time to set down his present when Al accosted him. But Mark was the one with the big reaction as Leon hoisted Al practically to the ceiling.

"What was that?! I had to beg Al to let me pick him up," Mark said as he glared at Leon with Al sitting on his shoulder.

"He let you didn't he," Zack pointed out not even trying to hide his amusement.

"Only for the pictures. And now look at him." Mark's bitching had a familiar ring to it.

"Settle down, you sound like me," Zack told him.

"How dare you," Mark said with fake indignation.

"Come on. I'll introduce you," Zack said. As he moved to go, he heard Mark say "How?" It was only just audible so maybe he didn't mean for

him to hear. When Zack turned, Mark tried to look innocent.

"Any way you like," Zack said, but instead of an offer, it was a challenge. His voice had a note of bitterness as if Mark had blackmailed him.

Zack watched Mark's face empty of expression.

"I'll go see..." Mark started to say turning like he would go toward the kitchen.

Zack grabbed him and hugged him before he knew what he was doing. Mark extracted himself from the hug quickly, but his expression had mellowed a little.

"I'll just go..." he tried to say again. He wasn't as cold about it this time.

Zack took his hand, which Mark also pulled from him. He looked over Zack's shoulder to make sure Al was busy and hadn't seen. Zack turned to look too. Al was introducing Leon to some of the kids and parents from Little Rainbow. Zack wondered what crazy things Al was saying to them.

As soon as he took his eyes off Mark, Zack knew that when he looked back, he would be gone. He found Mark just outside by the kitchen door leaning against the wall with his arms crossed exactly like he was waiting for Zack.

"I knew you would come and find me. Now go back to the party and let me mope," Mark told him.

"I meant what I said even if I didn't say it the way I wanted to. I just felt rushed. I'm sorry." Zack put his hand on Mark's arms where they were crossed. Mark touched his hand.

"I know this isn't the time for that. I shouldn't have said anything. And I don't want you to tell people because I pressured you into it. I want you to tell them because it's what you want. And I know you're not ready. I'll wait. Now go back in," Whatever emotions had hit Mark before, he had set them aside. Seeing that Zack didn't move, he added, "I'll be right in. Promise."

Reluctant to leave him, Zack went back inside. He knew nothing would be done about it right then. But their little scene had crystallized for him that this wouldn't keep forever. They were in a

holding pattern for now, but Mark was running out of patience with him. That was clear.

Zack had gone over to Leon, who had managed to escape the inexhaustible Al for the moment. As the two of them were talking, Mark approached.

"And who is this incomparable beauty," Leon said when Zack had barely opened his mouth to do the introductions.

"Leon, this is Mark, the man you've been dying to meet," Zack said as they shook hands. He took a breath as the feeling of pain took the place of everything he didn't say. His own reaction, even more than Mark's, told him that things couldn't go on as they have been. He wanted to shout to everyone that he and Mark were together, everyone except Al.

When they got home, Al was hyper and happy. They piled up the still wrapped gifts in the corner. Al was told he wouldn't be able to open them till tomorrow morning. Al pointed out that it wasn't Christmas but complied. Zack let Al run around past his bedtime so he could burn off some of that excess energy. Once Al was in bed, he and Mark would need to talk.

Waiting in his bedroom for Zack, Mark dreaded being alone with him after the way he had behaved. He wanted Zack to trust him and his judgment and to believe in their relationship. Acting immature didn't help his case. Mark was sitting against the headboard trying to read when Zack came in. Before he could say anything to him, Mark spoke up.

"It was Al's birthday. I know I was out of line. I'm sorry."

Zack sat at the foot of the bed facing him and put Mark's feet in his lap.

"It wasn't just you. I didn't have to make a big deal out of what you said. I could have let it go." Though he was willing to take half of the responsibility for what happened, Zack was frowning.

"What's worrying you?" Mark asked.

"If we get serious, I don't know how long we'll last. And now I'm worried that you won't even last until I can make up my mind."

Mark dropped his head. He had been right. Now that he pushed him, Zack had even less faith in him. At that moment Mark couldn't even speak to try to repair the damage. He swallowed as he saw Zack getting up. Mark was afraid he would leave. But Zack came to sit closer to him. He drew his thumb over the place between Mark's eyebrows. Mark chuckled. He must have been frowning, and Zack was erasing the frown. He knew that Zack didn't like to see him upset, and Mark could use that against him if he wanted to. But he didn't want to manipulate Zack.

"Relax. I'll try to be more patient," Mark said softly, "I live here now. You can't get rid of me because I am never letting you go."

Zack laughed lightly with relief and buried his hands in Mark's hair to ruffle it. Mark kissed Zack soundly. He still wanted Zack to make up his mind, but for now, he was just relieved that Zack wasn't mad at him. Mark cut the kiss short, but Zack didn't want him to stop. He kissed Mark now with the same intensity. Mark hooked his arm around his neck and pulled Zack down on top of him. Then he started taking Zack's clothes off. Looking into his eyes, Mark felt his body, its muscles and the hard on.

"If it was up to me, I would strip you naked and burn all your clothes. I would just have you walk around naked and fuck you senseless non stop," Mark told him.

Zack groaned and buried his face in Mark's neck. Mark could tell he was even harder now. His pants were still on though.

"That wasn't enough of a hint? Get those pants off," Mark told him.

Zack stood up and stripped his clothes off quickly.

"Take mine off too," Mark said. Now Zack stripped him as Mark breathed hard, almost gasping.

"You're going to fuck me now," he said and waited for Zack to kiss him. Zack delayed the kiss then gave it to him, his tongue plunging deep into Mark's mouth.

Feeling the head of Zack's cock at his hole, Mark felt his whole body pulse with need. He let Zack enter him but then switched positions so he was on top. Letting Zack's cock impale him again, he started riding. Maybe he was forcing himself down too hard and too fast because Zack stopped him.

"You can either slow it down or we can stop," Zack warned him and gave him a look that told him he was serious. Mark glared right back. He was already flushed and sweating. But if he didn't listen, Zack was ready to kick him off the ride.

Luckily, Mark was willing to compromise. He dismounted and lay on his back.

"Show me what you've got," he demanded of Zack.

Zack smirked at him then kissed him. Mark refused to kiss back at first. But soon enough he was pushing his tongue into Zack's mouth. Abruptly he pushed Zack away.

"You have work to do," Mark told him.

He didn't like making Mark stop, but Zack couldn't focus on his own pleasure while worrying that Mark was going past his limit. Now that he was taking over, he felt a little bit of pressure to prove himself. Zack got into position. He took Mark's legs and lifted them over his shoulders. He pulled Mark down toward him a little just for the hell of it. He could have just as easily moved up himself. Thinking the same thing, Mark's eyes narrowed at the maneuver. But his eyes were also heavy lidded from lust. After the interruption, Zack could tell that Mark was getting into it again. His breathing quickened and his expression was eager and yearning. He was an unbelievably sexy sight, from his half closed eyes to his proudly erect cock and his ready, aching hole.

Though he fucked Mark to quiet whatever fire was burning in him, Zack needed it too. They were both in their true element with Mark doing the fucking, but Zack wanted Mark in every way imaginable. He loved to feel Mark's body open to him, to pound the pleasure into him and see it released from that gorgeous cock then lick it up. He loved to see Mark smile after coming, to see all his troubles, all that aching erased. The mellow look flooded from his eyes into Zack's. Zack felt that with every fuck, every touch, his feelings for Mark intensified.

Zack didn't disappoint him. Mark felt such wild desire for him, and Zack had felt it too. It was strange how they could share something so intense and insane and out of control. They found the same impossible place, this hot, airless inferno and wanted only to devour each other. Mark was so flooded with pleasure that everything stopped. He felt

deaf and blind and then came back to himself. Feeling Zack licking his belly and his chest, he moaned. He still tingled with pleasure as Zack's tongued teased his skin. Now they rested next to each other, and Mark was content and waiting for his body to reenergize. He was also more grounded now and sure that they belonged to each other, that they were for real.

Chapter 33

It had been an overcast evening and the sky darkened too soon. Looking at the clock, Zack saw that it was a few hours before Al's bedtime. He was thinking about the old routine he and Al had followed for so long. Now it had a new dimension. Al's bedtime meant that it was time for Mark and Zack to come together. They might sit together and watch something or even read before they went to bed. Zack started looking forward to being with Mark as soon as he left him in the morning. All day long he just wanted to be touching Mark, looking at him, talking to him. But he also wondered what the cost would be. Any day now, Al would notice their relationship and start jumping to conclusions.

But Zack knew he would let Al down no matter what he did. Whether he rejected Mark, or pretended to while not being able to keep away from him, sooner or later, Mark would leave. Either getting sick and tired of Zack's indecision, or bored with Zack and his family life, Mark would break their hearts. Whatever Zack did there would be pain, turmoil and uncertainty in their lives, not the stability and security he wanted for Al.

Feeling like a selfish, bad father, Zack lingered at Al's bedroom door watching him playing with PJ and a toy truck. He seemed to be delivering something to PJ.

"Make her sign for it," Zack told him.

Al frowned up at him.

"I can't play with you right now. PJ needs me to play with her," Al said making the assumption that his father was some loser who needed to be diverted from pining for his boyfriend before he was even gone.

"I didn't even ask," Zack pointed out to him. "And aren't I your best friend?"

"No. PJ is my best friend. But PJ is only my best friend in this house. Lee is my best friend at kindergarten. Ricky is my best friend at Little Rainbow. Cory is my second best friend ..."

"Hey!" Zack interrupted fearing that the list would go on forever, and he still wouldn't be on it. "You have a million best friends, and I'm not even one of them?"

"Sorry," Al said with a shrug as if to underline the insincerity of his apology.

"No big deal. I'll make Mark my best friend." Zack looked at Mark for his agreement since he had just showed up next to him wanting to see Zack get bested by a little kid once again.

"I'll think about it," Mark said. He shrugged too.

"Betrayal on every side!" Zack said.

"That's not the position I'm after," Mark whispered to him. Then he mock consoled Zack in a normal voice, "I'm sure Al will still play with you when he has the time."

"He doesn't need me, he has PJ," Zack said.

"Don't be jealous," Al told him as he continued to play with his best friend.

Crossing his arms Zack stared him down, but Al only stared back with a goofy version of a tough guy expression.

"Look at that face. Don't you just love that face?" Zack said making Al look down with embarrassment.

It was Al's bath time, and Mark could hear Al giving Zack a hard time once again.

"I'm not even going to school tomorrow. I don't need it. I'm clean," Al was saying.

"You want to lick yourself like PJ does?" That was Zack, who then had to say, "Stop licking yourself."

Since Al wasn't cooperating, Mark decided to give Zack a hand. He poked his head around the doorway of Al's room.

"Hey, Al. What are we going to do tomorrow?" Mark asked him.

Al thought about it for a minute then shouted, "Dog park!"

"No," Zack vetoed that idea.

"We can set up a play date with Aaron and go to the regular park," Mark offered. Aaron was one of the few kids Al's age in the neighborhood.

"Yeah!" Al said, liking that idea too.

"But we can't go if you don't have your bath," Mark told him.

"Aww."

"It's OK with me if you skip your bath. We can stay home tomorrow, and you can watch me do chores," Mark said.

"That's boring." Al frowned at Mark.

"Al, are you ready to take a bath now?" Zack asked hoping that two alternatives he was given had helped Al see the light.

Zack had finished up with Al and joined Mark in the kitchen. Seeing that Mark was getting ready to sign up for classes for next term, Zack told him to sign up for extra ones since Al would be in school all day.

"I'll pay for them," Zack said.

"You're already paying me."

"It can be like a bonus."

"I wouldn't feel comfortable with that." Mark gave him a significant look.

"Come on. Are you busting my balls about our relationship by denying yourself an education?" Zack asked.

"I'm getting an education. And what you call our relationship is still unresolved." Mark gave him a reproving look to remind him whose fault that was.

Thinking that he had made his point clear, Mark expected Zack would drop it. But he had an argument of his own. He started it off by asking Mark, "If you weren't involved, and the situation was the same, what would you tell me to do about us, for Al's sake?"

"For Al's sake, I would tell you to make sure it was for real." Mark

glared at him as he paused. "Well, hurry up and make sure already."

"I want to put you through school."

"No."

"Just consider it a better deal in our barter arrangement. You get sex and tuition, I get you as a nanny and otherwise. Deal?"

"My counteroffer is I get a part time job while Al is in school."

"You'll be going to school too when Al is at school," Zack insisted. "Just make sure you're not too tired for sex."

"I'm too young to be too tired for sex. That's an old guy problem," Mark informed him.

"You bitch!"

Having scored so decisively, Mark smirked at him. By the end of it though, Mark was letting Zack pay for extra classes and feeling guilty about it.

The next day, Al was way overexcited considering it was just a trip to a quiet, local park not an amusement park. Of course, it wasn't a quiet park once Al and Aaron got there. Mark had to keep a close eye on them as they egged each other on while Aaron's mother went shopping with the baby.

After Aaron and his mom left, Al played more quietly by himself and with Mark. While Al was chasing some birds and lamenting that PJ wasn't there, Mark spotted a guy his own age who was sketching. He guessed he must be an art student and pointed him out to Al. Al wanted to know what he was drawing, and that gave Mark an idea. Taking Al by the hand, he went over to the guy.

"Can I bother you for a minute? Could you maybe show me your work? Sketches of people would be better if you have any," Mark said to the guy.

"You don't need to pretend to be interested in my sketches. I'm straight," the guy said while giving Mark a knowing look.

"I wasn't hitting on you. Why do all straight guys think all gay guys are after them?" Mark wondered, though he also wondered why this

guy had him pegged as gay so quickly.

"If it's not me, what do you want?"

Mark put out his hand for his sketch book since he already told him that's what he wanted. The guy gave it to him but watched him like he thought Mark might run off with it. As he flipped through it, Mark saw that many of the sketches were of scenery and objects. But quite a few of the drawings were of people, mostly old or nearly ugly people. There were no kids. There were two drawings of pretty girls. Making a decision, Mark handed the sketches back.

"OK. Can you do a sketch of this kid?" Mark put his hand on Al's head. After Mark took off his hand, Al flattened his hair roughly.

"What's in it for me?" the guy said while barely glancing at his would be subject.

Mark started to look through his pockets so he could give him an informed answer.

"I don't know how much cash I have on me," he said as he pulled out a few bills.

"Mark, you're poor," Al said. "Dad said, 'Don't ask Mark to buy you stuff. Mark is a poor college student'."

"Who isn't," the guy said without much sympathy. He did settle for the seventeen bucks Mark scrounged together.

He didn't want Al to pose or anything, which was a good thing since Al wouldn't have been able to do it. Instead, the guy, whose name was Wes, had Al bring him the best leaves he could find. Al ran around picking up leaves and showing them to Wes who always rejected them as "not good enough". Al sometimes accepted his verdict and other times defended his leaves as good ones. There weren't that many leaves at this time of year. Some had been blown off the branches by a recent storm and were now dry. Though they were few, Al didn't mind hunting them down as a kind of game. He always showed them to Mark for preapproval then presented them to Wes with a challenging stare. Wes accepted a leaf only when he was done sketching. He handed the sketch to Mark and took his money and the leaf from Al. Al smiled in triumph.

Mark swore Al to secrecy and stashed the sketch in his room. When he

came back from his class, he wordlessly handed the sketch to Zack. His eyes lit up and he smiled at Mark with tears in his eyes. After gazing at the sketch for a long time he said a quiet and heartfelt "Thank you". Then he called for Al.

"Hey, Al, did you draw this?"

Al shook his head. He thought it perfectly plausible for his father to think that he might have.

"Mark paid for it," Al said.

"I'd like to pay for it. How much was it?" Zack asked reaching for his wallet.

"Oh, come on. I wanted to give you that," Mark said a little exasperated since Zack was always trying to pay for everything.

"It's a surprise," Al chimed in.

"It’s a great surprise. Who did it?" Zack asked

"That’s the part you might not like." As Mark said that, Zack looked puzzled. "I shouldn't have let anyone sketch Al without your permission."

Zack didn't disagree. He looked back at the drawing. Al was absorbed in looking at the ground with a leaf in his hand and more at his feet. Zack noticed the signature on the bottom but couldn't read it.

"This is really good. Is the artist a friend of yours?"

"No. He was just a guy in the park," Mark admitted sheepishly. He knew he shouldn't have let some guy in the park sketch Al. Not that artist need permission to sketch people. But it still made Zack a little uneasy as Mark knew it would.

"It was for a good cause," Zack decided.

And the guy was good. He had captured something essential about Al as well as given the drawing a quality that went beyond something a guy in the park might draw for money.

"This is getting framed," Zack said and held up the drawing to see where it should hang.

"You hear that, Al. You're a work of art," Mark said to him.

Al nodded, never one to disagree with a compliment.

The drawing of Al was propped up against the lamp, waiting to be professionally framed. Zack wondered if they could have one done every year. Looking over at Mark, who was busy reading, Zack was happy that he had thought of it.

Zack idly watched Mark. Mark always looked so beautiful and contained like he had been perfectly placed by an expert hand. At the moment, he had been placed to rest his head back and look up at the ceiling. He was either lost in thought or lost in the music coming out of his chunky headphones. His legs were stuck under the coffee table and crossed at the ankles. Zack wanted to take a picture of him. No, he wanted an artist to sneak in and draw him like that guy had drawn Al. Zack would frame Mark, hang him on the wall, and look at him all the time. Or he might settle for hanging up the picture and let the real Mark roam free.

Chapter 34

Saturday afternoon, after dropping off the sketch to get framed, Zack found Mark and Al busy in the kitchen.

"Mark and I are cooking," Al boasted.

"You mean Mark is cooking," Zack tried to correct him.

"I am cooking too. You never give me any credit," Al complained, maybe rightly.

"OK. Thank you for helping Mark cook," Zack told him.

"That's better. And you're welcome," Al said, and seeing that Mark was reaching for something on a pantry shelf, he offered to get it. "I can do it," he insisted after Mark refused his help.

"No. It’s too high."

Al heard what Mark said only as a comment on his height.

"He's doing it too. He's calling me short," Al whined to his dad.

"Well, he has eyes, doesn't he? This is you. This is how short you are," Zack said and put his hand a little lower than the top of Al's head. Al took his hand and tried to correct him. Then as Zack lifted his arm, Al held on and hung from it. Mark clapped.

"Do it again," Al demanded as Zack put him down.

"You’re heavy. Make Mark lift you."

Mark pulled off the same maneuver but held him up longer, with Zack acting as a spotter in case Al’s arms got tired.

"You’re strong," Al said to Mark as he set him down.

"I lifted you too," Zack objected.

"You complained," Al said before he left the kitchen.

"I guess bitching and moaning lost you some points," Mark said.

"Oh, come on, be nice to me."

"Show up in my room naked, and I'll show you how nice I can be," Mark promised.

Zack didn't show up in his room naked, but Mark soon corrected that. He then pushed Zack down on the bed. Zack pulled him close by gripping his ass and massaging it. Mark moaned and kissed him. His tongue played with Zack's, now in his mouth now in Mark's. Lowering his head to Zack's chest, Mark bit his nipple just hard enough for Zack to enjoy the sting of it. He grunted and ran his hands through Mark's hair.

"Your body drives me crazy," Mark told him.

Zack's response to the compliment was to flip them over and get on top of Mark. He wanted to show Mark how he felt about his body. Mark arched a little under him, and Zack felt his erection grow even harder. Mark was writhing as Zack was running his hands down his arms then up over his chest. Covering Zack's hands with his, Mark reached up to his arms and pulled Zack down into a deep, long kiss. .Then Mark got down to business. He pushed Zack off, and grabbed the lube and condom. As he enjoyed the preparation while on his hands and knees, Zack turned his head for a kiss. Leaning over him, Mark kissed him. It was a shallow kiss limited by their position to only their lips but Zack felt it to his core.

Mark fucked him slowly in the same position for a while, but then he said he wanted to look at Zack.

"What? Look at this?" Zack pointed to himself making Mark smile and kiss him randomly all over his face and chest before he went back to fucking him in this new position. Their rhythm was faster now with more quiet grunting. With greater exertion, their muscles bulged and outlined themselves. Zack stared at Mark with hunger and need until he came bringing Mark to his orgasm with him. Mark dropped on top of Zack and into his embrace. Sweating and panting, Zack held him so tight he thought he might crush him. But Mark gripped him just as hard, pressed into Zack until they were one big sweaty mess.

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Al was both nervous and excited about starting first grade. He wanted

both Zack and Mark to take him to school on his first day. The day wasn't easy for the two of them either. They had to watch Al take his seat in a new classroom so uncertainly.

"Let's stay until he makes some friends," Zack said. Mark dragged him off just as Al spotted a kid he knew from kindergarten. They weren't the only adults peering anxiously at their little ones. There were a bunch of other parents lingering too long. But when Zack picked up Al at the end of the day, Al was full of news and no longer nervous at all.

One drawback of going to school was that Al didn't get to spend his days with Mark. Al made sure to make up for it the rest of the time by bugging Mark to play with him. Because Mark had to spend more time studying, Zack had to make sure Al didn't monopolize him too much. Al compromised by sitting next to Mark so they could do their homework together. Since Al would show him his work to get his approval, Mark did the same.

"Looks good," Al would always say.

Al also waited more eagerly for Mark to come home since he didn't get to see him since early in the morning. As soon as Mark came through the door, Al ran up to him and hugged him.

"You missed me?" Mark asked though the answer was obvious.

"Yeah. I never see you any more."

"You see me all the time."

"Not like before."

"You want me to come to school with you?"

"Yeah!"

"Maybe you can come to school with me, just hurry up and get accepted to college," Mark told him.

"Broccoli?"

"That's one way to put it," Mark had to agree.

As for Zack and Mark, they were still in a holding pattern. They had an undefined thing going, nothing was stated, nothing decided. Zack's doubts remained. He didn't doubt his own feelings for Mark. They

were too strong. And he knew Mark felt the same way. They came together and made each other feel amazing usually at night after Al was asleep. But now that Al was in school, Zack sometimes came home during the day when he knew Mark didn't have a class. He would leave work so he could have Mark alone, in daylight, in any room in the house.

Zack called first to make sure Mark was home. When Zack came through the door, Mark attacked him with a hard kiss. Zack groped his ass and pulled him close to feel his hard-on pressing on the one straining through the front of his own pants. He reached down and freed himself then Mark. When Mark kneeled to suck him for a while, Zack saw that Mark had the lube and condoms on the table by the door where they dropped the mail and car keys. There was a towel draped over the back of the couch.

"Someone was eager," Zack teased him. Mark answered only with a moan.

"Is that where you want me?" he asked unnecessary as Mark stood up. He unbuckled and let his pants drop. Mark pulled his shirt off though Zack wasn't going to bother. He leaned over the back of the couch and felt Mark's fingers probe him right away. He loved the brisk movements as Mark's fingers lubed and loosened him. The quick preparations were soon over and the head of Mark's cock demanded entry. Zack groaned as the slide of Mark's cock inside him opened him fully. Raising one knee to rest on the back of the couch, he helped Mark to fill him all the way. The rushed thrusting drove Zack crazy and he had to fight to hold on. He struggled and made himself last until Mark was ready, then he came with a long, loud moan of pleasure and gratitude. He gasped and laughed at the wonderful feeling. Only Mark could be so forceful and loving at the same time.

When he straightened, he told Mark, "Best lunch ever." He wanted to say so much more, but there wasn't enough time.

"And you didn't even eat anything," Mark said and they both knew he wasn't talking about food.

"No time," Zack said. He could eat Mark alive and never stop. But time was running out. He was in no shape to go back to work but still had to. Mark was wiping sweat off his own face then Zack's.

"You're a mess," Mark told him.

Zack laughed again and kissed him.

Just as Zack wondered how long they could keep things going without taking a decisive step, Mark called him on it. Zack had picked up lunch on his way home for a quickie. They were eating in the kitchen. Zack was feeling pretty content and hungry. The reason for both was the mutual suck off on the living room carpet. Then Mark spoke up.

"You look too pleased with yourself for a guy who refuses to make a decision. You think if you keep it unofficial, it's not happening?"

"That's like asking me if I'm stupid," Zack pointed out.

"And the answer?"

"It's easier not to think about what I'm doing. When you hear that some guy is shtupping the babysitter, do you think 'What a great guy' or do you think 'What a sleazeball'?" Zack asked.

"I don't think either because I don't give a crap. Unless the sitter is underage, which I am not."

Zack could tell that Mark was stressing that last part to remind him of that fact. Mark didn't say anything more. He waited for Zack to come to his senses, to accept the inevitable, to accept that Mark was one of them now, and that the real hurt would come if Zack denied that and let him get away. Zack smiled despite himself. He couldn't let go of his misgivings, but he couldn't let go of Mark either.

That evening it was almost like their lunchtime conversation continued while they sat around after dinner.

"You need a social life," Mark said probably leading up to something.

You are my social life, Zack wanted to say. They had been going out together more. Always with Al between them, but it wasn't all about Al.

"You need to see what else is out there so you can make up your mind about us," Mark said, getting to the point.

"I don't need to do that. I just need to be sure we can last," Zack told him. He couldn't even imagine dating now. Who in the world could hope to compare to Mark?

"You mean you're not sure I can last," Mark said reinterpreting what Zack said.

"You are so young."

"Stop thinking of me as some kid. I'm well past legal."

Zack could tell from his expression how annoyed he was by that.

"You're barely legal and still technically a teenager," Zack told him though he hated to think of him that way.

"No. I'm twenty now."

"What? When? You said you were nineteen."

"I turned twenty a few weeks ago," Mark said. "That means that we're both in our twenties.

"We are on the opposite sides of twenty and just barely."

"Just get over yourself already, old man."

"Are you making a case for or against us being together?" Zack asked him, but then realized Mark's birthday had gone by without him even wishing him a happy birthday. "You made me miss your birthday! Al will kill you when he finds out," Zack threatened.

"Um, it's no big deal." Mark tried to deflect the delayed firestorm he had ignited with this information.

"Not a big deal! You are going to choke on so much cake and presents and balloons," Zack promised him.

"Ouch and no," Mark said looking more frightened than when Zack was issuing death threats.

"No one is going to ask you. We're celebrating you, and that's that," Zack decided.

"You're celebrating me?"

"Yes. The you. The existence of you," Zack said sounding crazy even to his own ears.

"OK. Don't," Mark pleaded.

"Be quiet. You're like a deceased celebrity or a fallen hero. You have no say in what street gets named after you," Zack informed him.

"Look..."

"Fine. We aren't doing it for you. It's for Al. Now you can't refuse." With that Zack left him and went to recruit Al for this mission.

"Al. We have to throw a birthday party for Mark. We missed his birthday. He already turned twenty without us," Zack told Al with predictable results.

Al gasped then jumped up and down. He was torn between excitement about the party and distress that he missed Mark's birthday.

"We have to buy his cards and presents and balloons and cake," Zack said.

Al nodded vigorously at the list.

"And a donkey." This last item that Al added to the list didn't make a lot of sense to Zack.

"Huh?"

"A donkey. You know, a donkey," Al said as if repeating the word counted as an explanation. Paradoxically, Al made hitting motions to illustrate what he meant.

It slowly dawned on Zack what Al was talking about.

"You mean a piñata," Zack said with relief. "Sure why not."

"Mark said he had them for his birthdays when he was a kid," Al explained.

Now Zack was more hesitant. In fact, Al mentioning Mark's birthdays as a kid reminded him of some issues he needed to consider before jumping into this.

"We'll see about the piñata," Zack said, changing his mind. He didn't want to remind Mark too much of his birthdays with his family. He was even reconsidering the whole idea of making a fuss. Maybe it would be too painful for Mark to celebrate his birthday with them instead of with his own family. He decided to check with Mark before making any more plans and to listen to him this time.

Zack went back into the kitchen sheepishly.

"I think I got a little overexcited about your birthday. And now I got Al in on it too. Sorry. I'm like a bulldozer, or a bull or a bulldog," Zack said apologetically. "If it's going to be hard on you to have your birthday with us..." Zack started to say.

"No. It will be fun," Mark said without much enthusiasm but with a weird kind of determination.

"So we can celebrate you? You sure?" Zack didn't want him to feel pressured.

"It will just be the three of us. Right?" Mark asked.

"If that's what you want."

"Then it's fine. Just don't go crazy."

"Like piñata crazy?" Zack asked and cringed.

Mark shook his head at the mention of a piñata. He thought for a minute then smiled.

"It's OK. You can get one. Al will love it," he said knowing that Al might be disappointed otherwise.

"OK." Zack stared at him for a minute, and Mark patiently waited for him to either speak or go away.

"We like you so sometimes we go overboard," Zack said.

Mark blushed.

"Ha! Made you blush," Zack said childishly.

"I think I might be more mature than you are," Mark claimed.

"Hey! What?"

Mark only shrugged like the truth was self-evident.

"You might be a little calmer. Maybe saner. Maybe nicer," Zack listed, strengthening Mark's argument instead of his own. "It's all part of my charm, and I am one very charming man, Mark."

"I'm probably just too young to appreciate your more mature, sophisticated charm."

"Ouch! My ego just shriveled up and died. It just turned to dust, Mark."

Mark smiled and shrugged again. He was scoring off him left and right.

They had Mark's birthday party mostly in the back yard. Zack got the biggest steaks he could find. Seeing the scared look on Mark's face when he slapped them down on the grill, Zack was gratified. The cake was pretty big too. Mark had claimed he wanted a really big cake, but Zack knew it was for Al. They set up a ring of candles around the number 20. Though Al wanted to blow out the candles, he insisted that Mark had to do it himself, or his wish wouldn't count. Mark made sure not to look at Zack when he made his wish.

They hung the piñata from the tree in the back yard and let Al go crazy trying to hit it while blindfolded. While guiding him in the right direction, he and Mark also made sure to stay out of the way when he started swinging. Zack wanted to fill the piñata with raisins, but Mark wouldn't allow it. He pulled rank and demanded candy so that's what fell out when Al finally broke it open.

It was a fun day, and Zack was planning an even more fun night.

After the party and the clean up were over, Mark joined Zack in his bedroom.

"I was going to come to you," Zack told him, but Mark wasn't in the mood to wait.

He was going to strip quickly, but Zack wouldn't let him. He took Mark's clothes off while kissing him. Then he stood back and looked at him, but Mark didn't put up with that for long. Though Mark was ready to jump him, Zack made him stand still.

Zack began with a teasing touch that skimmed Mark's naked body. His skin hummed with anticipation. At the same time, Zack placed kisses along Mark's shoulders then down his spine. Mark moaned.

"You're torturing me for my birthday?" Mark asked, maddened by the lightness of his touch.

"That's what you get for making me miss your birthday," Zack told him between kisses that now ranged all over his chest.

With a sudden, hard kiss Zack tackled him to the bed. Mark thought they would get serious now, but Zack made him lie still for more torture. There was more kissing and licking, and sometimes the grazing of Zack's teeth. When he saw Mark lose his patience and reach for his rock hard cock, Zack told him, "I'll take care of that." His breath was all Mark felt along the length of his body until Zack reached his cock. Then he felt heat and wetness and the silk of Zack's tongue, followed by slow, deep suction that promised to satisfy.

Zack hadn't come yet and Mark could see the fire of it in his eyes. He held Mark close and asked him, "What would you like now?"

Mark smiled. He wanted to make Zack come, but he didn't answer. He leaned down to take Zack's cock in his mouth but only for a taste. Then he pushed him down on the bed and in position to get fucked. Zack sighed, happy with Mark's choice. As Mark's cock worked his insides with deep, all-fulfilling thrusts, Zack felt like this was Mark's gift to him. But soon Mark made another request.

"Ride me."

Leaning back with his cock ready for Zack, Mark watched him climb on. It was a treat to watch Zack's strong, golden body rising over him. His legs spreading to take in Mark's cock, he was a beautiful sight. Looking into Mark's eyes, Zack lowered himself smoothly until Mark could feel the satisfaction of complete entry. He sighed and moaned, then let out a long groan as Zack rose, pushing himself up on powerful legs. His body dropped in place again where it belonged. Now Zack was rolling his hips, and Mark massaged his thighs where they bulged with effort. Sweat gathered then dripped down Zack's face. Mark stroked his chest feeling it grow with each breath. Zack was riding hard now, his powerful body keeping a strong, steady rhythm. Mark loved the sight of Zack working so hard for his pleasure, for both their pleasure. Their moans were continuous, overlapping, as they were driven to climax together and desperately say each others names.

With Zack's chest heaving, Mark made sure to let him breathe between kisses until he got his breath back. Zack was still straddling him as their tongues lapped at each other's skin then met again in each other's mouths.

They made love slowly. They kissed softly, endlessly, like they were trying to stretch out time. They wanted to make it a night without end. But the night did end. They slept late and both of them scrambled out of bed ready to sneak out, until Zack realized they were in his bedroom and only Mark needed to sneak away.

Chapter 35

Mark was working on a paper in the formal dining room where he had books and notes spread out over the big table. That was the only use that table was likely to get any time soon. That room didn't get much light so Zack went over to turn on some lights for Mark. They both jumped as Al yelled, "PJ! No!"

Zack went to see what was going on.

"PJ got out!" Al yelled in a panicked voice when he saw Zack.

Al was by the front door, and it was ajar. Zack kneeled in front of him and took Al's wrists in his hands.

"What do you mean PJ got out? Did you open this door?"

"I..." Al looked at the door guiltily.

"Al! Why?" Zack started to ask in a very angry voice. To him this wasn't about the cat. Much worse possibilities were crowding his mind.

Hearing all this, Mark came over.

"PJ..." Al said, trying to pull away from his father to go outside. When Zack wouldn't let him go, he started to cry, calling PJ's name over and over again.

"I'll look for PJ," Mark said. As he went past them, he patted Al on the back, and he squeezed Zack's shoulder less gently.

Zack got the message, and he lowered the volume.

"You know you are never to open any of the doors that go outside, Al," Zack told him. His voice was harsh but not as loud. He could hear Mark yelling for PJ just outside.

Al was frightened for PJ and for himself. Tears dripped off his chin.

"There was a big bug..." Al tried to explain.

"You opened the door because of a bug?!" Zack was yelling again.

"Yes," Al said through sobs. "I wanted to look at it."

Zack glared at Al, but Al had his eyes closed tight as he cried.

"Let's go look for PJ," Zack said in a tight voice. He wiped the tears off Zack's face with the palm of his hand. He grabbed a tissue to wipe Al's nose.

As they stepped outside, hand in hand, they could see Mark a little further down the street. He was bending down, looking into the neighbors' bushes and under parked cars. They could hear him calling PJ's name softly like he was trying to entice her to come to him. When Mark stood up and looked their way, he shook his head.

Zack and Al went in the other direction. The street lights were coming on. It wasn't completely dark yet, but it was getting there. Al hadn't seen where PJ went so they meandered through the neighborhood. They circled around then back to the house to pick up flashlights and check around in case PJ showed up. As they neared the front porch, they hoped to find PJ waiting there, asking to be let in. When they didn’t see her, they made sure to circle the house in case PJ was somewhere in the yard. Not finding her, they went back out. Al called for PJ in a shaky voice, sometimes soft sometimes loud. They asked anyone they saw, but there had been no sign of a striped cat.

When it got late, Zack left Al home with Mark. Al protested, but Zack couldn't let him wander the neighborhood so late. Mark offered to keep looking so Zack could stay home with Al, but Zack decided that Mark was the right one to stay home. He was calmer. Zack was still on edge, haunted by what could have happened. He couldn't stop thinking of some much worse nightmare he could be living right now. He couldn't help imagining himself desperately searching in the dark, but not looking for a lost cat.

When Zack came back inside, he saw that Mark had Al already in bed. He dreaded telling them that he didn't find PJ. He saw a stack of lost cat fliers that Mark had already printed up. The fliers had PJ’s picture and Mark's phone number underneath. That made sense since he was more likely to be available on short notice. That was good thinking, as was getting these done so fast, plus it probably kept Al occupied too. Zack lingered by the door to Al's room listening to Mark try to get Al to go to sleep.

"You have to sleep. You need to build up your energy for tomorrow

when we go and look for PJ again."

"Why won't she come back?" Al asked. Zack was wondering the same thing.

"She's probably just hiding somewhere. Like when she hides from the big vacuum."

"And she'll come home?"

"Sure. We'll go looking tomorrow before you go to school, but you need your sleep first. You'll be tired if you don't get enough rest. Now close your eyes."

"OK," Al agreed sadly and reluctantly.

Zack waved at him from the door.

"I didn't find PJ," he said just as Al opened his mouth to ask.

Mark came to talk to him.

"I'll go and look now. You sit with Al," Mark said.

Zack nodded. He saw Mark grab the fliers and some thumb tacks and tape to hold them up. Zack went into Al's room and sat on the floor by Al's bed. He just looked at him for a while as Al looked back. Then Zack rested his head on Al's bed, near his middle. He didn't say anything to Al. He just took his hand and kissed it. Though he was tired, Zack couldn't sleep. He held Al's hand until he closed his eyes and was breathing evenly, finally asleep.

Mark had fallen asleep on the couch. He had promised Al that he would stay near the front door to listen in case PJ came by to scratch at the door so he could open it. The porch light was on, and Mark looked out through the front window for any sign of the cat. He was startled to see Zack sitting on the bench by the front door. He went out to him.

Thinking that Zack might be asleep, Mark came out quietly. Zack turned his head showing him he was awake. Mark could see a bowl with cat food and PJ's favorite treats at his feet.

"Are you going to stay out here all night?" Mark asked.

"Yeah," was all Zack said. He stayed quiet for a while, but Mark was

sure he would say more.

"I should have gone after PJ right away," Zack said. "I never thought she would disappear like that. I shouldn't have delayed."

"She's probably just not used to being outside so she's hiding," Mark said. He had told Al something similar.

"I thought Al knew not to open the door. I thought he knew," Zack said.

Mark had seen Zack's fear for Al. It had consumed him. Now he was worried about Al safety and feeling guilty that he hadn't found PJ. Mark couldn't think of anything to say to Zack that wouldn't sound like he was telling him that he could never keep Al a hundred percent safe. There was no way to make sure that Al would never put himself in danger. And even if Al and Zack and Mark, all did everything right, there were still no guarantees. None of that was something Zack needed to hear, but it was all Mark could think to say. Zack turned to look at him.

"Go to sleep," Zack told him with a smile. "Didn't you tell Al he had to rest up for tomorrow? That goes for you too."

"But not you?" Mark asked though he knew the answer. Zack was going to stay up waiting in case the cat showed up. And he would spend his time worrying about Al and what would happen if PJ didn't come back.

Mark went back in but not to go to sleep. He made two cups of strong tea. Before going out, he left a big note for Al in case he woke up and came looking for them. The note had a big arrow pointing to the front door, and it simply said "Dad" and "Mark". He took the mugs with tea outside and sat down next to Zack. Zack gave him a look but didn't object.

When it started to get light, Mark begged Zack to go and at least lie down. Instead, Zack talked him into going to get a few hours of sleep himself.

Later he and Al joined Zack on the porch for breakfast. Al had dressed himself before anyone had to tell him. And no one needed to tell Al to eat his cereal either. He slurped it up at record speed. His eyes constantly scanned the street for PJ. Then the three of them went looking around the neighborhood. They put up more flyers and asked the neighbors if they had seen PJ and made sure they would keep an

eye out for her. After Zack took Al to school, Mark continued the search by himself.

Zack constantly had to keep himself from calling Mark to see if there was any news. He knew Mark would call him if he heard anything or if PJ turned up. Worst of all, he couldn't stop thinking how badly he had handled things with Al. But that open door had triggered some of his worst fears. At least Al had obeyed the second rule which said that if PJ ever got out, Al was not allowed to go chasing after her. That morning, Zack had made sure to praise Al for doing the right thing about that at least.

When Zack picked him up from Little Rainbow, Al was disappointed to hear that PJ hadn't turned up. Though he hoped PJ would come back to them, Zack wanted to prepare Al in case she didn't. After dinner, as they got ready to go looking again, Zack told Al, "You know, if PJ doesn't come back it's only because she found some place nice where she wants to stay."

"Like she found another kid she likes better?" Zack asked looking worried.

"No. Not another kid. But maybe an old lady. Cats love old ladies. Maybe there was some old lady who was all alone, and PJ wanted to stay with her so she wouldn't be lonely." Zack watched Al to make sure he wasn't making things worse.

"Like Miss Olga?" Al asked.

"Not Miss Olga, but some nice old lady," Zack said.

"We can ask Miss Olga if she's seen PJ," Mark put in, and Al nodded.

When they got back without finding PJ or anyone who had seen her, Zack found Mark by the kitchen door. Mark didn't even need to say anything. Zack could see what he was looking at. Al's Sorry Jar was stuffed with sorrys.

"He keeps putting them in there," Mark said mournfully. "They all say 'Sorry, PJ'. He's breaking my heart."

Zack took his hand. He felt even worse since he was the one responsible for making Al feel bad.

"It's my fault. The way I yelled at him. I don't think he understands why I was so angry."

"It will be OK as long as PJ comes back," Mark said. That wasn't completely comforting, but Zack knew it was the truth.

Al had been less weepy about PJ than the night before, but he was still sad. It did help him to think of PJ somewhere else, maybe happy chasing birds or in the lap of some indulgent old lady. But that wasn't good enough. Zack didn't want his child less sad, he wanted him happy.

"PJ has to come back," Mark said. His eyes were still glued to Al's Sorry Jar.

When Zack saw he had a call from Mark, he told himself to calm down then he answered it feeling like he would burst.

"I'm at a vet's office. They have PJ. They called, and I came over here. I wanted to make sure it was her before I told you. It's PJ, but she is hurt a little. They'll release her to you, so you have to come down. And can you get Al out of school and bring him? It's on the way. I'll text you the directions." As Mark told him all this, all in a rush, Zack was speechless and teary eyed. He was glad Mark didn't stop talking until he got it all out because he was too choked up to speak. He managed to say, "OK." Not able to move for about a minute, Zack sat at his desk and absorbed the news. Then he rushed out of the office but made sure everyone knew it was good news that sent him running out.

When Zack gave him the news, Al looked like he might cry or scream but he just squirmed excitedly and squeezed Zack's hand extra hard as they walked out of school. Zack could tell he was saving his real reaction for when he saw PJ again.

Mark must have seen them arrive, because he came out to greet them. Al went to hug him, and Mark picked him up and carried him inside the animal clinic. Once he was faced with the receptionist and the veterinarian, Al was embarrassed and whispered for Mark to put him down. Then they showed Al where PJ was resting with her front leg bandaged.

Al laughed and cried at the same time when he saw her. Because of her leg, he couldn't hold her though. He hovered over PJ, looking at her from every angle as she meowed. After warning him to take it

easy, Zack let him sit with her while he did paperwork. He came back to find Mark looking at Al and PJ from the doorway. Zack put his arm around Mark. Mark turned and hugged him. Zack held him for longer than he should have, but he couldn't let go.

It turned out that some lady had brought PJ in then rushed off somewhere so they couldn't even thank her. Mark had distributed the flyers to all the local vet's offices and emailed the ones further away. Al thanked the veterinarian and her staff for taking good care of PJ. And he thanked the absent lady too. Then they secured PJ in the back seat with Al watching her obsessively during the whole ride home.

"I hurt my wrist, and PJ hurt her wrist too," Al noted.

"Yours got better and so will hers," Zack said instead of pointing out that cats didn't have wrists.

As he turned around while stopped at a red light, Zack saw Al kissing PJ's head about a million times in a row.

"You are going to kiss all the fur off her."

"She smells funny."

"Maybe they gave her a flea bath," Zack guessed. They had told him a bunch of stuff about all they had done for her, but he only cared that the wound on her leg would be OK and that PJ was back.

Once they had PJ home, sitting by the couch Al wouldn't leave her for more than a minute. They ate dinner from the coffee table so Al could stay close. Then they had to put a sleeping bag on the floor of Al's room so he could sleep next to her since she couldn't climb on and off his bed yet.

Mark caught Zack watching PJ and Al as they slept curled up on the floor. Seeing the tears in his eyes, he called Zack a big baby and gave him a hug that lasted forever.

Later that night, Zack saw PJ maneuvering around the dark house, mostly on three legs. He picked her up carefully.

"Not going to try to run away again are you? I need you to stay with us and distract Al from what a big screw up his dad is. You can't ever leave us," Zack told PJ, and Mark caught him doing it.

"That sounds familiar," Mark couldn't help observing.

Zack didn't say anything about that. He just kissed PJ between her ears.

Chapter 36

Zack wished he had woken up earlier to go running. Now it was almost ten and the sun was not kind to him as he jogged. Zack stood there dripping with sweat, waiting to cool down a little before going in. Waiting was torture when an air-conditioned house waited just two feet away. He drank some of the water he had left for himself on the front porch.

"It's too hot to run," Zack said as he went in.

"Then why did you?" Mark asked him instead of showing him sympathy.

"Because us old guys can't just sit on our asses and let nature sculpt us into perfect specimen of male beauty," Zack said eyeing Mark's body accusingly.

"Running is supposed to do that?"

"OK, you have two choices, either be sympathetic or be impressed."

After thinking about it for a minute Mark said, "Aww, you poor baby."

Later in the day, Zack started to notice that he might have overdone it. Ready to put Al to bed, he heaved himself off the couch with a grunt, feeling a little sore.

"Dad, you're old," Al concluded from this.

"Why don't you ever talk about how good looking I am?"

Al tilted his head to consider Zack's good looks with a deeply serious expression.

"You should comb your hair." That was Al's verdict, not "Dad, you are ruggedly handsome." OK, Al would never say that. Still, Zack decided to give him some advice.

"I'm relaxing. I don't need to comb my hair. And let me tell you something, Al. Grooming tips are a very poor substitute for compliments. I'll give you an example. Which do you like better? 'Al,

you look very handsome today.' Or 'Al, make sure to wash behind your ears before you start growing mushrooms back there.'"

"Mushrooms?" Al said distracted by the possibility of growing mushrooms behind his ears. He even touched behind his ear lobes gingerly, checking to make sure no agricultural activities had started there. The point Zack had been trying to make was completely forgotten. "Can that really happen?" Al asked. "Because I don't like mushrooms."

"What would you like to grow behind your ears, Al?" Zack asked him resigned to the detour their conversation had taken.

Al thought hard about this as if his choice would have real world repercussions. Zack decided to give him time to think it over.

"You have until Monday to decide. Now come on. Time for bed."

"Kumquats!" Al said as he climbed into bed.

Finding Mark in the kitchen, Zack stood close behind him. His hand moved over Mark's back then skimmed up and down his muscular arms.

"Are you saying it's time for bed?" Mark asked him.

Zack didn't answer him. He just started kissing his neck. Mark pulled away to lead them to his bedroom. Once in there, Zack groped Mark more firmly. He slid his hands down Mark's body, catching his fingers on the fabric of his t-shirt then on his pants. Mark slipped his hands under Zack's shirt. Zack's groans rumbled and reverberated from his chest to Mark's as they kissed. Mark arched into him wanting to prolong the contact between their bodies. While trying to maintain contact, they stripped. Every inch of Mark's skin was now available to Zack. His kisses were as slow as his caresses, as if he was waiting for Mark's skin to answer his touch, to bloom under it, to warm then cool as he licked him. As Zack was grinding against him, he slowly thumbed Mark's nipples and kissed him at the same time. Mark grabbed his ass, felt for the cleft between the cheeks. He teased him by just stroking the valley between his ass cheeks, then he only let his fingertips graze Zack's hole. Maddened, Zack thrust at him harder making sure their cocks rubbed against each other. But then their hard cocks rubbed together too long and Mark had to stop.

"Don't make me come like this," Mark almost begged, breathing hard.

Zack stopped, panting himself. He had a need to make Mark come over and over again. Zack pulled him close. For a second Mark was loose limbed, almost limp, but then his body hardened as he took a hold of Zack, wrapped his arms and legs around him.

"I need more of you," Mark told him and kissed him deep and hard. He then pulled back and looked into Zack's eyes hungrily.

To satisfy his need, Zack turned him around. Mark raised his knees and lowered his shoulders. He put his ass in position that told Zack he was welcome to it. Zack could tell he needed to come.

Feeling Zack lick his hole, Mark gasped then let out a moaning sound he had to stifle into the mattress. Zack's tongue pushed further in and Mark sighed. Zack replaced the tongue with his finger and stroked his insides. Mark called his name. Knowing how he felt, Zack quickly added one then two more fingers and pumped harder. With three fingers in him Mark came and dropped to the bed shaking. But he was up before Zack could blink. Zack could tell that Mark had the urge to bite him, but he only kissed him and licked him while Zack groaned with need for more. Then Mark was down in front of Zack licking up the underside of Zack's cock. Soon he felt Mark's mouth envelop him in heat and then the wonderful suction took him up and over the edge.

Mark slowly worked his way up Zack's body with licks and kisses until he was lying on top of him. He looked down at Zack, who knew that he saw satisfaction on his face and love in his eyes.

Mark woke up feeling hot and immediately saw why. Though sound asleep, Zack was all over him. Mark remembered falling asleep the other way around. Now he didn't want to push Zack off him even if he was making him too hot.

Zack was like honey. Mark could never get enough of him. But with Zack, there was more to it than just seeking and giving satisfaction. It was all the quiet moments with just the two of them and all the loud ones when Al was energized and Zack teased him.

It was when they were in bed that they distilled what they felt into pure pleasure. With every look and every touch, Zack showed him what it was like to be truly intimate. Sex with Zack was good and pure and dirty. Being with Zack in and out of bed told Mark this is why we're alive, to experience this. But being in Zack's life promised even

more. With Zack and Al, maybe "family" wouldn't be a bitter word in his mouth any more.

Zack left Mark's bedroom and looked in on Al, but he was already up. He found him playing with PJ in the living room. Noticing that she didn't have any trouble with her front leg any more, Zack was glad.

"PJ, you're goofy," Al said as he watched the cat pouncing on a piece of bubble wrap, which Al had already popped. PJ was getting her blunted claws caught on the plastic then struggling furiously to get free. The cat looked up at Zack briefly but decided that bubble wrap was more compelling and went back to pouncing on it. Al watched absorbed only with her even though Zack had just come out of Mark's bedroom.

This time, Al hadn't noticed, but soon he would be asking questions. He considered Mark a permanent part of their lives even though he had been warned not to.

"Mark said he won't always be living with us," Al informed him as Zack drove him home from Little Rainbow soon after the summer break had started.

"Of course he won't," Zack confirmed. "One of these days you'll be too old to need a nanny, you know."

"I'm not a baby. Babies have nannies. But Mark can still stay with us."

"No. Mark will want a different job..." Zack was going to say more, but Al interrupted him.

"That's OK. He can have a different job, but he can still live with us," Al insisted.

"Not really. You see, Mark will want to have a place of his own. Like his own apartment."

"He doesn't need his own apartment. He can live with us."

"Al. That won't happen," Zack told him bluntly, maybe even a little harshly. It made no difference.

"I think it will," Al had said stubbornly.

Zack wanted to prepare Al for Mark eventually leaving them, but he

just couldn’t convince him. Rather than argue with him when he was being so bullheaded, Zack decided to let time and experience prove one of them right. But seeing that Al was already so attached to him, Zack wasn't looking forward to dealing with the fallout when Mark left them.

That had been months ago. Now losing Mark was unthinkable. Zack knew it was up to him to give Mark every reason to stay.

Chapter 37

After their big Sunday breakfast was over, Mark recruited Al to help him. Zack ruffled Al's hair as he came into the kitchen where the two of them were busy cleaning up.

"Don't tell me you got some useful work out of this one," Zack said seeing that Mark got Al to help out a little.

"Who is this 'this one' all the time? I'm Al," Al asserted.

"Listen to this one wanting to be called by his name," Zack teased him.

"Mark, make him stop," Al whined looking up at Mark for his help.

Mark was up to the challenge.

"Let me introduce you guys. Zack this is Al. Al this is you old man," Mark said enunciating the last two words.

"No!" Zack started to object, but Mark ignored him and told Al how to use this new way of addressing his dad.

"You should say, 'Hi, old man' And 'Thanks, old man.'" Mark instructed Al.

Al opened his mouth as if ready to try out these new phrases.

"Al, he is joking," Zack said in a panicked voice. "And it's not funny," he said to Mark.

Zack crouched down in front of Al.

"OK. Al. I will never call you 'this one' or 'that one' again. But you have to promise never to call me old man. Is it a deal?" Zack asked earnestly.

Knowing he had the upper hand, Al hesitated. He looked up at Mark for his input. Mercifully, Mark nodded, approving the transaction.

"You have a deal," Al said and put his hand out for a hand shake.

Al pumped Zack's hand like he was trying to draw water.

"That's an awesome handshake, Al," Zack said, compelled to be nice for the moment.

"I know," Al said with all due pride.

When Al went off to play, and he and Mark were left alone, Zack asked, "So when I gave you this job, did you hear me say 'Side with Al against me whenever possible and make my life hell.'? Is that what I said?"

"That's how I remember it," Mark said looking him straight in the eye.

Zack couldn't help smiling at him.

Waiting for Mark with a faint buzz of arousal coursing through him, Zack grinned when he heard the door open and then close. He sat up and opened his arms to welcome him into his bed, but Mark only shook his head. He sat cross-legged on the bed, opposite Zack.

"You're done being patient," Zack guessed.

Since it wasn't a question, Mark didn't answer but asked a question of his own.

"Let me ask you. Do you want me here for Thanksgiving?"

"Of course I do," Zack said immediately. It was painful for him to think of Mark not being with them. And it was only weeks away.

"What about for Christmas and New Year's?"

"Yes," Zack said, starting to get the idea.

"And Valentine's day and Easter?"

"Yes."

"What about for Al's high school graduation? College graduation? His wedding?"

"Yes," Zack said, resigned to the questioning.

"As a family friend? As someone who gets an invitation in the mail?" Mark kept pushing with no mercy.

"No." Zack frowned at the thought that Mark would be out of his life

and need to be invited. He had to be there for all of it. That was the only option.

"And do you want me in your bed every night?"

"You know I do."

Mark didn't say anything more. He didn't need to.

"I see what you're getting at," Zack admitted. "Yes I want you in my life and Al's life. I want you in every way I could ever want someone. And no, I don't want to think of any of those days without you. Or any day without you. OK. You're right. I can't give you up. Now stop using the Socratic Method on me."

"Why when it's working."

"And if I ask you all those questions, how..."

But Mark didn't even let him finish asking.

"Yes to all of the above. I know what I want. You're the holdout," Mark accused him.

Zack covered his face with his hands.

"Just admit how much you need me," Mark demanded.

"You don't need me."

"Ok. Maybe I don't need you. But someone exactly like you. You have any identical twins or clones of yourself lying around?"

"I am too old for you, and I have a kid." Zack was going to say more but Mark jumped in.

"You do? You talking about Al? I think I've met him once or twice, just in passing."

Zack smiled at his sarcasm.

"I don't see why I should give you up just because you're an idiot," Mark said.

"You're being kind of aggressive," Zack pointed out.

"I have to be, or I'll get left in the dust. You'll go off with some doctor

or a lawyer while I get left sitting on the side of the road."

"I'm not going to leave you on the side of the road," Zack said though he laughed at the image.

"Are you going to dump me when I stop being useful?"

Zack's answer was an emphatic "No!"

"Then why are you resisting me?"

"Because you are young, and you deserve your freedom and to have fun and to live a little."

"What, like, sleep around, go to clubs to pass some test of life experience then you'll have me?"

"No! That's not what I'm saying." Zack hated the thought of it even though it was exactly what he had just told him to do.

"You're saying you don't trust my judgment to know what I want," Mark summed up.

"I trust your judgment."

"Just not about you. Somehow you have blinded me with your irresistible charms, and I've lost my head," Mark said resorting to sarcasm again.

"OK, now you're just being mean. And stop speaking for me."

"Try making some sense, Zack, and I won't have to. I mean does your reasoning even make sense in your own head?"

"Until you start poking holes in it, yes, it does. Kind of."

"You're just afraid."

"Yes, I am. OK. Here's a reason you can't contradict. Where will you be in two years? Five years? Here with us? Maybe but maybe not. Al and I will be here, and I will have to explain to Al why you aren't with us any more."

As he heard him say that Mark looked really sad. To answer him, he didn’t make any empty promises.

"OK. I can't guarantee anything. But no one can. You think there is

someone out there who can guarantee you that they'll be here in two years or ten?"

"No," Zack had to say.

"But you aren't really looking, are you?" Mark gave him another sad look.

"No, I'm not."

"So it's not me versus some ideal guy. It's me versus nothing."

Zack was lost in thought for a minute. He wanted to give Al a stable environment, but then he thought about Mark leaving after being part of their lives. Either he and Mark would be together and maybe break up in the future, and Mark would leave. Or he and Mark would never get together, and Mark would leave. There was no way to guarantee a win. It wasn't that kind of game. But Zack was so used to denying himself that he didn't know if he could let even someone as wonderful as Mark into his life with Al.

"I don't know what to think any more," Zack confessed.

"Here's something to consider. Only one of us is confused," Mark pointed out.

"So the one who isn't confused gets to decide?"

"No, lets have the guy who doesn't know if he's coming or going make all the decisions."

"Hey," Zack objected weakly.

"You are deciding for both of us. For all three of us. And I don't think you're equipped. You're too afraid."

"You're not the boss of me."

"We can't have a serious conversation, can we," Mark said like it was a bad thing.

"Good. Who the hell wants to have a serious conversation?"

"Then just throw in the towel already so we can finish up with this drama crap and get on with the good stuff," Mark told him.

Zack could tell that Mark was worried that he wasn’t getting through

to him, and maybe even that he never would.

"Stop looking so sad, you're killing me," Zack told him.

"Let me be happy then."

"You think I can make you happy?"

"When you aren't being an ass, yes, you make me happy."

Zack laughed.

"I forgot about that. The whole happy thing."

"You mean you didn't plug that into your equation?"

"I think I might be losing this argument," Zack said as Mark frowned at him, afraid to hope. Zack could feel the urge to struggle against being happy leaving him, the bindings loosening. Maybe he was free to be with Mark. Maybe there was nothing real standing in the way, just his stupid anxieties and those were losing power and letting go of him.

"OK. Let's be happy," Zack decided.

Now Mark laughed a surprised laugh of the unexpected winner. He stared at Zack waiting for some confirmation. Zack grabbed him and kissed him making all the questions disappear. Then he looked into Mark's eyes looking for signs of happiness. He found happiness written there but also something he would call love if he dared.

"Now we celebrate with sex right?" Zack said.

"Nah. I think I want to get some sleep," Mark said even going so far as to get up and turn toward the door.

Zack didn't try to stop him. He just had a glare ready for Mark when he turned around with an evil grin on his face. Coming back slowly, he let Zack pull him into bed. Zack tried to undress him quickly, but when he tugged at his zipper, nothing happened. It was one of those toothy, metal zippers that had given Zack trouble on other occasions.

"Is your zipper stuck? Because I will rip these off you," he vowed to Mark as he tugged at his jeans now like he meant to carry out that threat.

Mark pushed him back and unzipped himself.

"It's not stuck. You are just clumsy," he told Zack. He kicked the jeans off and to the floor then climbed to straddle Zack.

"I know my way around a zipper. I've handled more zippers than you have doorknobs," Zack boasted.

Mark grimaced then said, "What?"

"OK. Not that many. And I've always been safe," he assured Mark who was still making a face at him.

"Did you just brag about being a slut?" Mark asked not wanting to let Zack off the hook.

"Men are experienced. Girls are sluts. Everyone knows that."

"Yeah. In the 1950's."

"Mark, look around this room. Being a feminist will get you nothing right now," Zack pointed out.

"You know, you make it really hard to maintain a sexy mood," Mark said.

"I know a surefire way to shut me up and restore the mood." Zack stared pointedly at the bulge in Mark's boxers.

"Fine," Mark said with a too realistic sigh. He lay back, not even bothering to undress himself the rest of the way. He laced his fingers together and put his hands under his head. Then he just waited.

"Unbelievable," Zack said as he climbed over to him.

First he felt Mark through his boxers. He could tell that Mark was fighting the urge to push up into his hand.

"You want to come in them?" Zack asked. The idea was kind of a turn on for him, but Mark shook his head. Zack still kept rubbing him through the thin fabric, listening to Mark's breathing speed up. Zack lowered the waistband and let Mark's erection pop free before he started pulling the boxers the rest of the way off. With a slight delay, Mark raised his hips lazily, only enough to let the boxers slide over his ass.

Zack savored Mark’s cock as he let it slide into his mouth. Mark groaned and rubbed his shoulders then dug his fingers in as Zack pulled back, flicking the underside with his tongue. He licked the head

playfully listening to all the low noises Mark was trying to suppress. Taking it slow, Zack drove him crazy and had him nearly thrashing on the bed. He drove himself crazy too in the process. But when he put his hand on his own cock, Mark warned him, "I want that." Mark came while clutching Zack's head. But then he leapt on Zack and sucked on the head of his cock lovingly. He licked the shaft then the balls, but didn't let Zack wait too long before sucking him down. Soon Zack said Mark's name and burst in his mouth.

They were quiet for a while. Zack felt the rise and fall of Mark's chest as he rested against him. But their stirring cocks didn't let them lie still for long. Mark pushed Zack on his back and kissed his way down his body. His warm, wet tongue snaked over Zack's dick guiding it to erection. Their kissing went from slow to urgent and deep. Their bodies came alive and hardened as they wrestled to touch each other everywhere.

Lying in the messy bed, Zack felt happier than he thought he could be. He was light enough to float to the ceiling, and so full of strength he could lift a house. He had the urge to go and wake up Al and tell him the good news. Instead he talked to Mark who was blinking slowly, ready to fall asleep.

"You've made everything better, the good and the bad. You fill my heart," Zack said in a whisper. "You know, when I looked at all those other men and felt so little, I thought maybe there wasn't any room left because my heart is full of Al. But I guess a heart rebuilds itself with love."

"Am I supposed to say something sappy now?" Mark asked.

"No. I think I was sappy enough for both of us," Zack admitted.

"You were," Mark confirmed and then kissed him. He stayed with his arms wrapped around Zack and whispered to him, "You and Al rebuilt my heart too. I think it's almost whole again."

"Well, we love you. I love you," Zack confessed.

"I know," Mark said casually.

"No. You're supposed to melt."

Mark shrugged.

"At least say it back to me," Zack demanded.

"Maybe later," Mark said with a smirk.

"What the hell did I get myself into?" Zack asked in dismay.

"Don’t whine. Fine. I guess I love you too," Mark said with a roll of his pretty eyes.

Zack grabbed a hold of him and looked into those eyes. Mark smile went right through Zack’s heart.

"I love your smile even if you are mean," Zack said. He could see Mark swallow. His eyes softened and pulled Zack in. There it was, Mark was melting in his arms. They kissed softly, lazily, like two men who had all the time in the world to enjoy each other.

Chapter 38

Mark felt a tingle run down his spine when he saw he had a call from Zack. He took a breath as he thought about the sound of his voice.

"Come have lunch with me," Zack said as Mark answered the phone.

"Lunch?" Mark had been hoping for lunch in and sex on the kitchen floor.

"Come on. I'm hungry, and I miss you. You put those two things together, and we have lunch."

Mark agreed though he would have rather Zack dropped in at home for a little bite and a lot of sex. But doing other stuff with Zack was nice too. Plus everything they did seemed like foreplay. Mark found that he still had that tingly feeling now because he would see Zack not just hear him.

Zack wore his happy to see you look in his eyes as he kissed Mark in front of the nice restaurant. It was their first public kiss. They held hands as they walked in. It was all so new to Mark. But this was what it was like to have a boyfriend. And what a boyfriend. Mark was proud to be with him, and since they were in a gay friendly area, they didn't have to hide. As they were eating, they were both aware that this was the first time they had gone out alone together. Mark wondered if that was what Zack had in mind.

Seeing Mark sitting across from him, looking so gorgeous, Zack couldn't believe his luck. Mark had fought so hard to be with him and been so patient when he could have had anyone. Zack was determined to make him happy, though he suspected that it would be the other way around. Or maybe all their happiness would be multiplied together with Al's. Now instead of dreading it, Zack looked forward to telling Al that Mark was in their lives to stay.

"Was this a date?" Mark asked him as they left the restaurant with their arms around each other.

"If you want it to be," Zack said with fake nonchalance.

"It's up to me?"

"I've been waiting for you to make the first move," Zack said.

Mark was instantly furious.

"I did make the first move at the beach house and at great personal risk," Mark reminded him.

"Don't say you were jeopardizing your position."

"There was the possibility of total humiliation as well as immediate firing. And I liked living with you and Al. I was scared to risk that. It was like having a family."

Zack kissed him.

"It's a date then," he said to Mark.

"That's it? Come on. I've been waiting forever," Mark complained.

"You want more tongue?"

"At least drag me into the bushes. And yes, I want more tongue."

Actually all the bushes along that street were small enough to step over. It was a pleasant street with a lot of small shops and restaurants on either side. The sidewalk was lined with saplings and parked cars. It was a nice area to stroll through though many people hurried by.

Zack explained to Mark why he wasn't getting any serious action.

"It's a first date. You get a kiss on the doorstep. Tongue is optional. Then I promise to call you. Then a couple of days later, maybe I do."

"No wonder you've been single all this time," Mark told him.

"If I'd known someone like you was out there, I would have put more effort into dating. You are like someone I dreamed up." Seeing how Mark looked at him, Zack warned him, "Don't say I'm being embarrassing."

Mark smiled.

"Actually, I felt the same way when I met you. Like I had given up because I didn't know someone like you existed."

"You're too young to give up," Zack admonished him.

"You meet guys, and they're OK, and you have some fun. But then it seems like that's all there is. And then there's a guy standing in front of you, and he reaches inside you and grabs your heart and won't give it back."

Zack just stared at Mark. It seemed impossible that he did that, but that was definitely what Mark had done to him. They stood very close together on a street corner and nuzzled each other. With every second he spent with Mark, the feeling of being together was settling over him, becoming real.

The only thing left to make their relationship official was to tell Al. Zack was nervous and excited as he waited for Mark in the evening. They hadn't planned how they would announce their relationship to Al, But Zack definitely wanted Mark to be there, mostly as backup. He had never had to do this before. Even though Al was guaranteed to love the idea, it was still a little bit scary. It was no wonder. Al was still the most important person in Zack's life.

Mark arrived and gave Zack an "Are you ready?" look. Before speaking with Al, Zack sat with Mark on the couch. It was a delaying tactic, but it also helped steady him. Now that the decision was made, Mark was surprisingly uninterested in the process of delivering the news to Al.

"I'm sure you'll do fine," Mark told him without even a trace of concern.

Zack put his arm around Mark's shoulder and pulled him closer hoping some of that serenity would rub off on him.

Al walked in on them like that. A puzzled look only briefly flashed on his face. Almost immediately, he walked up to them and tried to climb between them wiggling to make a space for himself when there wasn't enough room.

"Comfy?" Zack asked him after he wedged himself between them.

"Aha," Al said.

Zack leaned over to whisper into Mark's ear, "My son is cock-blocking me."

Al looked at Zack suspiciously.

"No telling secrets. No whispering," Al said

Now Zack reached his hand over to play with Mark's hair. Noticing what Zack was up to, Al pushed him a little further from Mark so he would behave. Zack tried that maneuver again, and Al caught him.

"You keep your hands to yourself, mister," Al told him.

Smiling, Zack looked at Al. He wondered if he was starting to understand the real relationship between him and Mark.

After Al got bored and left them alone, Zack told Mark, "OK. I'm doing it now."

"What's the rush? I was thinking we could just wait until we send out the wedding invitations and let him find out that way," Mark said and gave him a look to remind him how long he had to wait for this. Then he got a phone call and walked away to talk in the kitchen like Zack wasn't about to share this momentous news of their relationship with his only child. Zack glared after him then called Al back.

Al put on a look of exaggerated patience as he walked over. When Zack asked him to sit with him, he seated himself and let out a long sigh.

"You have it rough, huh?" Zack said to him.

"Yeah," Al agreed wholeheartedly and let out another big sigh.

"Well, I have some good news. Mark and I love each other," Zack told him while watching his face carefully.

"Aha." That's all Al said like what Zack was telling him, not only wasn't momentous, but wasn't newsworthy at all.

"Are you happy for us?" Zack prompted him

"Sure," Al said, still unimpressed by this big news. In fact he looked like he was waiting for Zack to say something worthy of calling him over and making him sit down.

Instead of trying to impress him with the magnitude of his news, Zack got down to more practical matters in this new situation.

"OK. Just so you know, sometimes Mark and I will be sleeping in the same bed."

"Can PJ and I come and sleep with you too?" Al asked. At least that part of it got his attention, but only as a means for him to join some kind of slumber party.

"No," Zack told him.

"Why?"

"You kick and PJ sticks her butt in my face."

"Just Mark can sleep with you?" Al asked ready to question the fairness of the arrangement.

"Yes. Just Mark. And sometimes the door will be locked, so don't be surprised."

"Why?" Now Al was suspicious.

"Because Mark and I will be doing grown up things."

Al looked puzzled, but Zack dismissed him before he could ask for a detailed description of these grown up activities. Al went off to find Mark in the kitchen. When he found him he announced, "You're going to be my second dad. Good job, Mark." Then he ran off to share his news with PJ before anyone could tell him not to get ahead of himself.

Mark dropped on the couch next to Zack, who was moping.

"What about good job, Dad. Where was all that excitement when I was telling him we're together?" Zack whined.

"Did you really expect this to be a big deal to him? Why should he be excited about your sex life? It's not like you got him a puppy," Mark pointed out.

"Does every animal rate higher than me?" Zack wanted to know.

"Yes. If you want a big reaction, get him a dog," Mark said.

"I don't need to get him a dog. I got him you. See how happy he is," Zack replied, waving in Al's direction.

Just as it seemed that the whole big announcement was a little bit of a letdown, Zack felt Mark's arms go around him. When he turned, Mark kissed him.

"You did good," Mark told him.

"Finally some praise," Zack said.

Mark promised to reward him later, but Zack already felt rewarded. He had Mark in his arms, and Al was rooting for them. For a while Zack and Mark just stared into each other's eyes. They had told the most important person in their lives about their love, and Zack recognized this as the moment when they were truly together. He could see it in Mark's eyes as he smiled at him. It was like the sky smiled down on Zack, no it was like the whole world smiled. Zack pulled Mark close into a tight hug. As Mark hugged him even more tightly, it felt like a promise never to let go.

Though it almost seemed like Al hadn't understood what Zack told him, he did seem to know that things had changed. One day when he came into the kitchen and caught them kissing, he pushed them apart until they stopped.

"Are you going to be kissing all the time now?" Al asked.

"Yes, all the time," Zack told him smugly. When he tried to kiss Mark again, Al pushed him away. Then he stood guarding Mark so Zack couldn't get to him. Mark tried to get around him, and Al switched to guarding Zack.

"Make up your mind. Who are you jealous of?" Zack told him.

"I am not jealous," Al claimed but as they went to sit on the couch, Al followed them and sat between them.

When they tried to sneak their hands past him he grabbed at them, but he was outnumbered. This developed into a crazy, three way wrestling match. Al was soundly defeated by means of tickling though Zack did get a foot in the stomach while Al giggled and kicked uncontrollably.

"You give up?" Zack asked him.

"No."

"Go play with PJ so I can cuddle with Mark."

"Don't say cuddle," Mark objected.

"I am using kid appropriate language."

"Fine." Mark agreed to put up with it but only grudgingly.

And it wasn't like they could do anything more advanced even with Al out of the room since he could run in any minute and get an eyeful of something they would need to explain by saying things like "that's how grown ups play when they love each other or just want to get off". Zack wanted to avoid those kinds of conversations as long as possible. He also worried that Mark would get sick of it, want to be uninhibited, not to have to lock the door and stay quiet.

"We need a babysitter," Zack said.

"And what am I?" Mark wondered.

"We need a babysitter for sex."

"That still sounds like me."

"So we can ditch Al and get freaky." Zack spelled it out since Mark refused to understand him.

Mark laughed at his wording.

Even though Al knew about them now, that only gave them a little more freedom. They were still stuck with all the complications of a sex life with a kid in the house. As Mark locked the bedroom door, Zack told him, "Make sure one of us unlocks it later. I don’t want it staying locked all night," Zack said.

"You are such a dad," Mark said with a sweet smile.

"On the list of the best things that ever happened to me, you are second only to Al," Zack said as he stood by the bed and watched Mark strip out of his clothes.

"Am I supposed to say something sickeningly sappy too now?" Mark asked.

"Yes, Mark. It's now your turn. Let's hear it. Sicken me with your best, sloppiest love confession."

Mark hugged him.

"Poor, old, love starved thing," he said. But there was nothing mocking about the way he wrapped his arms around Zack or in his look when Zack pulled back a little so he could see him. Not comfortable with

being stared at, Mark buried his face in his shoulder.

"I'll probably say 'I love you' again sooner or later," Mark almost promised, mumbling into his shoulder. "Sooner if you make me come real hard."

"That's extortion." Zack said, but they were looking into each other's eyes again and everything was written there. Zack could read "I love you" in Mark's eyes and a thousand other things that couldn't be said in words.

"Would you take those off already," Mark complained seeing that Zack was still wearing his boxers.

"I was waiting for you to remove them with your teeth."

Though Zack had been joking, Mark liked the idea and he kneeled. First he just looked up at Zack from that position making Zack's cock jut out even more. He couldn't wait for Mark to free it. Leaning toward Zack, Mark brushed his face against the front of Zack's boxers nudging his cock. He then licked the skin right above the waist band. Gripping them with his teeth, Mark worked the boxers down off each hip first. Then he pulled them off his erection letting it spring free and proud. Without stopping to give Zack's cock any attention, he worked the boxers down pausing only to lick or bite Zack's legs along the way. Once the boxers were at his feet, Mark stood up and looked at Zack like he was waiting for his next assignment.

Zack leaned in and let their lips touch. Giving him an insolent look, Mark took the hint and kissed him. They kissed and grappled trying to work their way closer to each other than was humanly possible. Their hands roamed all over, though Mark's lingered longest on Zack's ass.

Mark had been teasing Zack's asshole with his fingertips when Zack handed him the lube. He slipped the condom on Mark then got into position on his hands and knees. Kissing his back, Mark worked his fingers in slowly, enjoying the tightening of Zack's opening and of his whole body. He stroked Zack's ass with his other hand then down the back of his leg. Gasping in anticipation, Zack reached for Mark who leaned in for a kiss. First Mark shifted on the mattress then he gripped Zack's sides in his strong hands. Zack caressed the muscles of his arms then his legs in return. After Zack anchored himself again, Mark guided his cock inside him. With every inch, Zack felt a pulse of pleasure climb his spine. The faster Mark pumped him, the more constant the pleasure became. It was like Mark was playing some

sweet percussion against Zack's body. They changed positions when Mark stopped to add more lube. Zack held up his legs while Mark rubbed his face against them, then ran his hands up and down. Before starting up again, Mark went in for a kiss. But even as he started fucking him again, Mark leaned down to kiss him. Groaning when their mouths met, Zack felt the pleasure in him skyrocket. It just kept building and building, adding up to more than Zack could take. Then Mark really let him have it, pounding to an amazing finish that left Zack crazy with love and pleasure until he collapsed.

Afterward, Mark was lying face down across his chest like he was shipwrecked there. Zack ran a hand down his back and he groaned. He turned his head toward Zack and smiled lazily like he barely had enough energy left just to pull his mouth into a smile. He looked spent.

"What did I do to you?" Zack asked.

"You emptied me out."

"Sorry. I thought you young guys had more stamina."

"Shut up. I was doing all the work," Mark said but then he shifted over so his head was on the pillow next to Zack's. Seeing that he was almost asleep, Zack reminded him, "You promised to tell me something."

"Goodnight?"

Zack nudged Mark until he slurred, "I love you."

Zack kissed him softly and watched him smile. He felt Mark fall asleep and drag him down with him.

Though now neither one of them had to rush back to his own bedroom before morning, they did have to suffer through being woken up by Al knocking on the door, demanding to know what they were doing in there.

"Are you cuddling?" he accused them.

They made sure everything and everyone was decent and told him to come in. Al looked at them suspiciously then climbed into bed with them. PJ was rooting around the bed somewhere then she found Mark's belt hanging off a chair and started pawing at it.

Now that Al was settled in between them, Zack looked at him expectantly.

"Did you come empty handed? I thought you were going to serve us breakfast in bed," Zack asked him.

"I can make cereal," Al offered.

Zack pictured three bowls of cereal, and Al squirming around restlessly like he was doing now, not to mention the mess he would make in the kitchen and when he carried the bowls over to them. While Zack was still busy being horrified by Al's idea, Mark stepped in.

"We'll all get up together and make breakfast," Mark decided.

Zack kissed the top of Al's head and thought about how they didn't used to have big Sunday breakfasts. He thought about how much better everything was with Mark in their lives. While dreaming of the wonderful things that were yet to come in their new family life, Zack closed his eyes.

"Mark, he's going to sleep!" Al complained.

"Pinch him," Mark told him.

The End

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